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Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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CAT AND MOUSE

October 3rd, Ed Brown got up to the base cabin of his trap line with his winter's outfit.

He hung an N. C. Company calendar on the wall and started marking off the days.

October 8th, the hole into the other world opened.

In the meantime, of course, Ed had not been idle. All summer the cabin had stood empty. He got his bedding, stove, and other cabin gear down from the cache and made the place livable. The mice were thick, a good fur sign, but a nuisance otherwise. Down in the cellar hole, when he went to clear it out for the new spud crop, he found burrowings everywhere.

Well, old Tom would take care of that in short order. Tom was a big, black, bobtailed cat eleven years old who had lived with Ed since he was a kitten. Not having any feline companionship to distract him, his only interest was hunting mice. Generally he killed a lot more than he could eat, racking the surplus in neat piles beside the trail, on the doorstep, or on a slab in the cellar. He was the best mouser in interior Alaska.

Ed propped the cellar hatch with a stick so old Tom could come and go as he pleased, and went on about his chores, working with a methodical efficiency that matched Tom's and went with his thinning gray hair and forty years in the woods. He dug the spuds he had planted that spring. He made a swing around his beaver lakes, tallying the blankets in each house. He took the canoe and moved supplies to his upper cabin. He harvested some fat mallards that had moved down on the river with the coming of skim ice on the lakes. He bucked up firewood and stacked it to move into camp with the first snow.

On the fifth morning, as he was going down to the boat landing with a pail for water, he found the hole into the other world.

Ed had never seen a hole into another world, of course, nor even heard of such a thing. He was as surprised as any one would naturally be to find one not fifty feet from their front door.

Still, his experience had been all in the direction of believing what his eyes told him. He had seen a lot of strange things in his life, and one more didn't strain him too much. He stood stockstill where he had first noticed the hole and studied it warily.

It was two steps off the trail to the left, right beside the old leaning birch, a rectangular piece of scenery that did not fit. It looked to be, as nearly as he could judge, about man-size, six by three. At the bottom it was easy enough to see where this world left off and that one began. On the left side the two worlds matched pretty well, but on the right side there was a niggerhead in this world, the moss-covered relic of a centuries old stump, while that world continued level, so that the niggerhead was neatly sliced in two. Also, the vegetation was different, mossy on this side, grassy on that.

On up around the hole, though, it was harder to tell. There was no clear-cut line, just the difference in what you could see through it. In the other world, the ground seemed to fall away, with low scrubby brush in the foreground. Then, a mile or so away, there were rising hills with hardwood forests of some kind, still green with summer, covering them.

Ed stepped cautiously to one side. The view through the hole narrowed, as if it faced the trail squarely. He edged around the old birch to get behind it, and from that side there was no hole, just the same old Alaskan scenery, birch and rose bushes and spruce. From the front, though, it was still there.

He cut an alder shoot about eight feet long, trimmed it, and poked it through the hole. It went through easily enough. He prodded at the sod in the other world, digging up small tufts. When he pulled the stick back, some of the other world dirt was on the sharp end. It looked and smelled just about like any dirt.

Old Tom came stretching out into the morning sun and stalked over to investigate. After a careful inspection of the hole he settled down with his paws tucked under him to watch. Ed took a flat round can from his pocket, lined his lip frugally with snuff, and sat down on the up-ended bucket to watch too. At the moment, that seemed the likeliest thing to do.

The hole into the other world stayed there, as unobtrusively fixed as if it had been there since the beginning of time. Nothing came through, and nothing moved in the other world but leaves stirring now and then with a breeze, clouds drifting across the sky. Ed began to realize it was getting late in the morning, and he had not yet had breakfast. He left old Tom to watch the hole, got stiffly to his feet and went on down the trail to get the pail of water he had started for. From the cabin door, he could still see the hole into the other world. He kept one eye on it while he cooked breakfast.

As he was finishing his second cup of coffee, he noticed the view into the other world becoming duller, dimming in a peculiar fashion. He left the dirty dishes

and went over to look more closely. What was happening, he found, was just that it was getting dark in the other world. The effect was strange, much like looking out the door of a brightly lighted room at dusk. The edges of the hole cast a very clearly marked shadow now, and outside this shaft of sunlight the view faded, until a few yards away it was impossible to make out any detail.

Presently the stars came out. Ed was not an astronomer, but he had a woodsman's knowledge of the sky. He could find nothing familiar in any of the stars he saw. In some way, that was more unsettling than the hole itself had been.

After he had finished the dishes, he cut two gee-pole spruce, trimmed them, and stuck one on each side of the hole. He got some thin thread he used to tie beaver snares and wove it back and forth between the poles, rigging a tin can alarm. It seemed likely someone or something had put the hole there, it had not just happened. If anything came through, Ed wanted to know about it. Just to make extra sure, he got some number three traps and made a few blind sets in front of the hole.

Then he went back to his chores. Whatever was going to happen with the hole would happen when it happened, and winter was still coming.

He set some babiche to soak for mending his snowshoes. He ran the net he had set at the edge of the eddy for late silvers and took out two fish. Old Tom had pretty well cleaned up the mice in the cellar hole, but they were still burrowing around the sills of the lean-to. Ed took a shovel and opened up a hole so Tom could get under the lean-to floor. He got out his needles, palm, thread, and wax; and mended his winter moccasins.

Off and on, he checked the hole into the other world. There was nothing but the slow progression of alien stars across the sky. Finally old Tom grew bored and left to investigate the hole under the lean-to. Shortly there were scutterings and squeakings as evidence that he, too, had got back to business.

Toward evening, Ed got to wondering how a living creature would take transition into the other world. He had no intention of trying it himself until he knew a lot more about it, but he thought he might be able to scare up a surrogate. Out by the wood pile some live-traps were piled under a spruce, from the time when Ed had been catching marten for the Fish and Wildlife to transplant. One was still in pretty fair shape. He patched it up and set it among the cottonwoods at the head of the bar, where there were some rabbit trails.

When he went to bed it was still dark in the other world. He left the cabin door ajar so he could see it from his bed and set his shotgun, loaded with 00 buck, handy.

Nearing sixty, Ed was not a sound sleeper, even when he had nothing on his mind. About ten it started to get light in the other world, and that woke him up. He padded out to look, but there was no change, it looked about the same as yester-

day. He went back to bed.

The next morning there was a rabbit in the live-trap. With a pole, Ed pushed the trap with the rabbit in it through into the other world and watched. Nothing happened. After a while the rabbit began nibbling at some spears of grass that pushed through the wire of the cage. Ed pulled it back and examined the rabbit carefully. It seemed healthy and about as happy as a rabbit could expect to be in a cage.

It did not get dark in the other world till about noon, that day; and about seven, when it was dark in both worlds, Ed heard the jangle of the tin can alarm, followed by the snap of one of the steel traps.

He took a flashlight and found a small hoofed animal, hardly bigger than old Tom, rearing and bucking with a broken leg in the trap. It had sharp little spike horns, only a few inches long, but mean. Ed got several painful jabs before he got the animal tied up and out of the trap. He restrung the alarm, then took his catch into the cabin to examine.

It was herbivorous and adult, from the looks of its teeth and hoofs, though it only weighed about fifteen pounds. As an approximation, Ed decided it was female. When he killed it and opened it up, at first glance it looked reasonably familiar, on closer study less so.

The blood, anyway, was red; not blue or yellow or green; and the bones were bones, just odd-shaped.

Ed cut off a slice of heart and tossed it to old Tom. The cat sniffed it dubiously and then decided he liked it. He meowed for more. Ed gave it to him and fried a small sliver of ham. It smelled and tasted fine, but Ed contented himself with a single delicate nibble, pending further developments. Anyway, it was beginning to look like a little exploration would be feasible.

It got light in the other world at one in the morning that night. Ed had the days there pretty well pegged now. They were roughly twenty-seven hours, of which about thirteen hours were dark. Not too high a latitude, apparently, and probably late summer by the looks of the vegetation.

He got up a little before daylight and looked at the rabbit and old Tom. Both seemed to be doing nicely. Old Tom was hungry for more otherworld meat. Ed gave it to him and made up a light pack. After some thought, he took the .450 bear gun he used for back-up when guiding. Whatever he ran into over there, the .450—a model 71 throwing a 400 grain slug at 2100 fps—should handle it.

The first step through into the other world was a queasy one, but it turned out to be much the same as any other step. The only difference was that now he was in the other world looking back. From this side, the niggerhead at the threshold was sliced sharply, but it had been kicked down a little when he came through, and what with shoving the cage through and pulling it back, so that some clods of

moss and dirt were scattered in the other world. For some reason, that made Ed feel better, it seemed to make the joining of the two worlds a little more permanent.

Still, it had come sudden, and it might go sudden. Ed went back into his own world and got an ax, a saw, more ammunition, salt, a heavy sleeping robe, a few other possibles. He brought them through and piled them in the other world, covering them with a scrap of old tarp. He cut a couple of poles, peeled them, and stuck them in the ground to mark the hole from this side.

Then he looked around.

He stood on the shoulder of a hill, in a game trail that ran down toward a stream below, in what seemed to be a fairly recent burn. There were charred stumps, and the growth was small stuff, with some saplings pushing up through. There was timber in the valley below, though, and on the hills beyond, deciduous, somewhat like oak. South was where east had been in his own world, and the sun seemed smaller, but brighter. The sky was a very dark blue. He seemed lighter in this world, there was a spring in his step he had not known for twenty years. He looked at his compass. It checked with the direction of the sun.

He studied the trail. It had seen a lot of use, but less in recent weeks. There were sharp hoof-prints of the animal he had caught, larger hoof-prints, vague pad-marks of various sizes, but nothing that looked human. The trail went under a charred tree trunk at a height that was not comfortable for a man, and the spacing of the steps around the gnarled roots of an old slump did not fit a man's stride.

He did not notice the Harn creature at all—which was understandable, it was well camouflaged.

He worked circumspectly down the trail, staying a little off it, studying tracks and droppings, noticing evidences of browsing on the shrubs—mostly old—pausing to examine tufts of hair and an occasional feather. Halfway down the slope he flushed a bird about ptarmigan-size, grayish brown in color.

The trail was more marked where it went into the timber. It wound through the trees for a few hundred yards and came out on a canoe-sized stream. Here it forked. One trail crossed the stream and went up the hill on the other side, the other followed the stream up the valley.

All his life, except for a short period in France, Ed had been a hunter, never hunted. Still, you don't grow old in the woods by jumping without looking. Coming into a new situation, he was wary as an old wolf. There was a little shoulder right above the fork in the trail. He stood there for several minutes, looking things over, and then went down and crossed the stream at the next riffle, above the ford. By doing so, although he did not know it, he missed the trap the Harn maintained at the ford for chance passers-by.

On the other side of the creek, the trail ran angling off downstream, skirted

a small lake hidden in the trees, climbed over another low shoulder and dropped into a second valley. As Ed followed along it, he began to notice a few more signs of life—birds, small scurriers on the ground and in tree tops—and this set him thinking. The country had a picked-over feel to it, a hunted and trapped-out feel, worse where he had first come through, but still noticeable here.

Ed looked at the sun. It was getting down in the sky. If there was any activity at all around here, the ford at dusk would be as likely a place as any to find it. He worked back along the ridge to a point above where he judged the ford to be. The breeze was drawing up the valley, but favoring the other side a little. He dropped down and crossed the stream a quarter mile above the ford, climbed well above the trail and worked along the hillside until he was in a position where he could watch both the ford and the fork in the trail. He squatted down against a tree in a comfortable position, laid his gun across his knees, and rummaged in his pack for the cold flapjacks, wrapped around slices of duck breast, which he had packed for lunch.

After he had finished eating he drank from his canteen—the water in this world might be good, it might not, there was no point in taking chances till he could try it on the cat—and took an economical chew of snuff. He settled back to wait.

After a while, sitting there, Ed began to feel uneasy. The timber was big here, and open underneath, almost parklike. The nearest cover was fifty or sixty yards off to his left, a little tangle of brush where a tree had fallen and let a shaft of sunlight through.

It looked possible, but it didn't feel quite right. Still, it was about the only place anything big enough to bother him could hide. The feeling was getting stronger, the back hairs on Ed's neck were starting to stand up now. Without visible movement, or even noticing himself that he was doing it, he let awareness run over his body, checking the position and stiffness of his legs—he had been sitting there quite a while—the balance of the gun across his knees, the nearness of his thumb to the hammer.

Thoughtfully, still studying the patch of brush, he spat a thin stream over his left shoulder at a pile of leaves a few feet away.

Thinking about it later, Ed could almost have sworn the tobacco juice sizzled as it hit. Actually, this was probably imaginary. The stinging unit was not that sensitive to tobacco, though it was sensitive enough. As the drops splattered it, the pile of leaves erupted with a snuffling hiss like an overloaded teakettle into a tornado of bucking, twisting activity.

Ed's reflexes were not quite as fast as they had been when he was young, but they were better educated. Also, he was already keyed-up. Almost as it started, the flurry in the leaves stopped with the roar of his rifle. Fired like that, the heavy

gun just about took his hand off, but he did not notice it at the moment. He came erect in a quick scramble, jacking in a fresh round as he did so. The scene took on that strange timeless aspect it often does in moments of emergency, with a man's whole being focused on the fleeting —you know, in an academic sort of way, that things are moving fast, you are moving fast yourself, but there seems plenty of time to make decisions, to look things over and decide what has to be done, to move precisely, with minimum effort and maximum effect.

Whatever the thing at his feet was, it was out of the picture now—it had not even twitched after the heavy bullet tore through it. There was a stomping rush in the little thicket he had been watching. Ed took two long quick steps to one side to clear a couple of trees, threw up the gun and fired as something flashed across a thin spot in the brush. He heard the whack of the bullet in flesh and fired again. Ordinarily he did not like to shoot at things he could not see clearly, but this did not seem the time to be overly finicky. There was no further movement in the brush.

He stood there several long moments, listening, and there was no further movement anywhere. He eased the hammer down, fed in three rounds to replace those he had used, and walked slowly back to the first thing he had shot.

At that range, the bullet had not opened up, but it had not needed to. It had practically exploded the creature anyway—the .450 has two tons of striking energy at the muzzle. From what was left, Ed deduced a smallish, rabbit-sized thing, smooth-skinned, muscular, many-legged, flattish, mottled to camouflage perfectly in the leaves. There was a head at one end, mostly undamaged since it had been at the end of a long muscular neck, with a pair of glazing beady eyes and a surprisingly small mouth. When Ed pressed on the muscles at the base of the skull, the mouth gaped roundly and a two-inch long spine slid smoothly out of an inconspicuous slot just below it.

At middling distances or better, Ed could still see as well as ever, but close up he needed help. He got out his pocket magnifier and studied the spine. It looked hollow, grooved back for a distance from the point. A drop of milky looking substance trembled on its tip.

Ed nodded thoughtfully to himself. This was what had made him uneasy, he was pretty sure. What was the thing in the brush, then? Innocent bystander? He got stiffly to his feet, conscious now of the ache in his wrist that had taken most of the recoil of the first shot, the torn web between his right thumb and forefinger where the hammer spur had bitten in; and walked over to the thicket.

The thing in the brush was larger, quite a bit larger, and the bullets had not torn it up so badly. It lay sprawled with three of its eight legs doubled under it, a bear-sized animal with a gaping, cavernous, toothless mouth out of all proportion to the slender body which seemed designed mainly as a frame for the muscular

legs. It was not quite dead. As Ed came up it struggled feebly to get up, but one of the heavy slugs had evidently hit the spine, or whatever carried communications to the hindquarters. It fell back, shuddering convulsively, and suddenly regurgitated a small, furry animal.

Ed stepped back quickly to bring his rifle to bear, but the newest arrival was obviously already dead.

He turned his attention back to the larger animal. It, too, was dead now. There was an obvious family resemblance to the smaller one he had shot in the leaves. Both were smooth-skinned, many-legged, and now that he looked closely he could see this one had two mouths, a small one just under the nostrils, purse-lipped and tiny in its huge face but quite like that of the other creature. Neither looked even remotely like anything he had ever seen before.

He laid down his rifle and took out his knife.

Ten minutes later, he knew quite a bit about the thing, but what he knew did not make much sense. In the first place, its blood green, a yellowish pussy green. In the second place, the larger mouth, complete with jaws and impressive musculature, opened not into a digestive system, but into a large closed pouch which comprised most of the animal's torso. There was no proper digestive system at all, only a rudimentary gut, heavily laced with blood vessels, terminating at one end in the small second mouth, at the other in an even smaller anus. Otherwise, the thing had no insides except a good pair of lungs and a stout heart—none at all. Bone, muscle, lung, heart—plus the ridiculously inadequate gut—that was it.

What about the small, furry, animal then; the one the other had been carrying in its pouch? There was nothing much out-of-the-way about it—a feline sort of carnivore, something like a marten. The fur looked interesting, and he skinned it out, casing the hide. On the left ham, the skin was punctured and there was a swollen, bluish area—about the sort of wound that would be made by the fang of the first thing he had shot. Ed squatted back on his heels, studying it and putting two and two together. What two and two made was pretty hard to believe, but it fitted the evidence.

He wiped his knife carefully on the grass, put it back in its sheath, and got to his feet. Suddenly, the feeling that he was not alone recurred. He looked quickly around.

Back where he had shot the first thing, a man in forest-green whipcord trousers and jacket was leaning over, hands on knees, looking at the remains. The man looked up and met Ed's eyes. He nodded casually and walked over to the second thing, prodded it with his toe. After a long moment he nodded again to Ed, smiled briefly, and winked out.

Ed stared at the empty air where the other man had been, mouth open. It was just a little too much. A lot of things had happened to him in the last few days,

he had been able to take most of them more or less as they came along, but after all, he wasn't a chicken any more, he was pushing sixty, and there is a limit to what a man should have to put up with at that age. The thought of his snug cabin, with a good fire going, moosemeat bubbling in the pot, the gas lantern hissing, and the bottle of Hudson's Bay rum he had tucked under the eaves against just such an occasion as this, was suddenly very appealing.

Besides, it was getting late, and he didn't think he cared to be stumbling around this world in the dark.

He elbowed his pack up, hooked the left shoulder strap, and headed for home, staying off the trail in ordinary caution and watching his footing, but moving pretty fast just the same.

Actually, he need not have been so careful.

The Harn had been surprised and shocked by the explosive violence of the man's reaction to a routine harvesting maneuver. It was a relatively young Harn, but it retained memories of its own world, where there were also nasty, violent things which killed Harn. It was not pleasant to think that it might have evoked some such monster in this hitherto peaceful place.

Then, to top that, there had been the sudden appearance of the Warden. The Harn, of course, saw the Warden not as a man, but in its true aspect, which was not at all friendly.

All in all, this did not seem the moment to start any new adventures. The Harn pulled in all its mobile units, including the stinger it had left at the hole into the other world. It huddled protectively together in its nest, considering these new developments.

By ten that evening, Ed, in conference with old Tom and the bottle of Hudson's Bay, had done considerable hard thinking, pro and con.

Of course, he didn't to go into the other world, just because the hole was there. He could block it off, seal it up with timbers and forget it.

He sat there and thought about this, absently smoothing the strange fur on his knee. For an old-timer like himself, things weren't too hot in this world. Fur didn't bring much of a price any more, and he couldn't get it in as he had when he was younger. His wants were simple, but there was a certain rock-bottom minimum he had to have. Too, the winters were starting to bother him a little, the arthritis in his hands was getting worse every year, times he hardly had the strength in his left hand, which was the worst, to hold an ax. Another five, ten, years and it would be the Pioneers' Home for him—if he did not get stove up or sick sooner and die right here in the cabin, too helpless to cut wood for the fire. He had helped bury enough others, bed and all when they didn't come down the river at breakup and somebody had to go up and look for them, to know it was possible.

The other world was milder, it had game and fur—good fur, too, from the

looks of it, something new that could lick any mutation or synthetic on the market, and the income tax had still left a few fellows who could pay through the nose to see their women look nice.

And, the country was new. He'd never thought he'd have a crack at a new country again, a new, country. Often, he'd thought how lucky people had been who were born a hundred and fifty years ago, moving into an easy, rich country like the Ohio or Kentucky when it was new, instead of the bitter North.

The Harn would be a nuisance—Ed did not think of it as the Harn, of course, but just as "they"—but he supposed he could find a way to clean them out. A man generally could, if varmints got troublesome enough.

And the man in forest-green whipcord, well, he have been just an hallucination. Ed did not really believe in hallucinations, but he had heard about them, and there was always a first time.

Ed sighed, looked at the clock, measured the bottle with his eye—still better than three quarters full.

All in all, he guessed, he'd leave the door into the other world open.

He put old Tom out and went to bed.

The first order of business seemed to be to get better acquainted with the Harn, and first thing in the morning he set about it. He took the rabbit out of the live box and tethered it in a spot in the other world close to the hole, where raw earth had been exposed by a big blowdown, sweeping the ground afterward to clear it of tracks.

Getting better acquainted with the Harn, though, did not mean he had to have it come in and crawl in bed with him.

Before going to bed the night before, he had set half a can of snuff to steep in some water. He loaded a bug gun with this and sprayed the ground around the hole into the other world. From the reaction yesterday, he judged the stinging units did not like tobacco juice, and this should discourage them from coming through.

He checked his bear snares and found three in good enough shape to satisfy him—the large Harn beast, he suspected, would be about like a grizzly to hold. Three would hardly be enough for a serious trapping program. Ed made his own snares from old aircraft control cable, using a lock of his own devising which slid smoothly and cinched down tight and permanently. He got out his roll of wire and box of locks and started making up some more, sitting where he could watch the rabbit he had staked out.

By the middle of the afternoon the snares were done, but there had been no action with the rabbit, nor was there for the rest of the day.

In the morning, though, it was gone. There were three new sets of tracks in

the bare spot—two smaller ones, either of which would have fitted the stinging unit, and what looked like a carrier's. The action was clear enough. The small things had prowled around the rabbit for some time, stopping frequently as if uncertain and suspicious. Finally, one had moved in, with a little flurry of action when it met the rabbit. Then it had moved back and squatted again.

The big tracks came directly to the rabbit and went right out again. They were heavy enough to be clear in the grass beyond the bare spot.

Ed went back to the cabin and rummaged till he found a pair of snakeproof pants a Stateside sport had once given him—heavy duck with an interlining of woven wire. They were heavy and uncomfortable to wear, and about as useless as wings on a pig in Alaska, where there are no snakes; but they had been brand-new and expensive when given to him, and he had put them away, thinking vaguely he might find a use for them some day. It looked like that day might be now.

He slipped them on, took his rifle and hunting pack, and set out to follow the animal that had taken the rabbit.

The trail showed well in the morning dew, going straight away along the hillside as if the thing were headed some place definite. Ed followed along for a quarter mile or so, then found himself on a fairly well beaten path, which presently joined another, and then another, till it was a definitely well used trail. It began to look to him like the thing might have a den of some sort, and he might be getting pretty close to it. He left the trail and climbed up into a lone tall tree, fire-scorched but still struggling for life. From there, he could follow the trail pretty well with his glasses for a couple of hundred yards before he lost it. Finally, he settled on a spot under an old burnt stump as a likely spot for the den.

He focused the glasses carefully and after a few minutes saw a flash of movement there, as if something had slipped in or out. Nothing else happened for about an hour. Then the grass along one of the trails began to wave and a large beast, similar to the one he had shot, trotted into sight. It slipped in under the stump and disappeared.

For the rest of the morning, nothing went in or out.

There was a very good reason for this, and Ed was it.

All night and day after he shot the stinging unit and the carrier unit, the Harn had stayed in its nest. By the second evening, it was getting hungry. It ventured out and found a few morsels, but the organized hunting network it ordinarily maintained had been disrupted, it had lost track of things, and the pickings were poor. Then it stumbled on the rabbit Ed had staked out.

Its first impulse was to leave the rabbit strictly alone. In spite of its early promise, the other world had so far given nothing but trouble. On the other hand, the rabbit was meat, and very good meat, by the smell and looks of it....

The Harn kept its observation unit prowling irresolutely around the target

for half the night before it finally gave in to appetite and sent in a stinger to finish the rabbit off, a carrier to pick it up.

It was still uneasy about this when it noticed Ed near the nest the next morning, confirming its fears. It promptly broke up the net it had been re-establishing and pulled all units back in. Maybe if it left him strictly alone, he might still go on about his business, whatever that was, and let the Harn get back to its harvesting.

By noon, Ed was getting pretty stiff sitting in the tree. He climbed down and eased over toward the stump, watching where he set his feet. He was pretty sure the snakeproof pants would stop the stingers, but he saw no point in putting them to the test until he had to.

About fifty yards away, he got a good view, and it did look like there might be a sizable hole under the stump. He studied it carefully with the glasses. There was a smooth-beaten mound in front, and exposed roots were worn slick.

As he got closer, he noticed an unpleasant smell, and near the mouth of the den he got a sudden whiff that almost gagged him—a sour, acid, carrion stink like a buzzard's nest. He moved back a little. The hole was wide and fairly high, two or three feet, but too dark to see back into. Still, he had a sense of something stirring there not too far back.

Ed had considerable respect for caves and dens with unseen occupants—he had once helped carry in the bodies of two men who had poked a stick into a spring grizzly's den. At the same time, he wanted pretty badly to know what was in there. He suspected there was a good deal more than what he had already seen.

The bug gun loaded with tobacco juice was in his pack, and a flashlight, a small light one designed for a lady's purse which he always carried when away from camp. He got them out and leaned his rifle against a root sticking out just to the left of the den. Taking the bug gun in his left hand and the flashlight in his right, he stooped over to shine the light in, keeping as well clear of the entrance as possible.

All in all, he must have got about a five-second look, which is a lot longer than it sounds when things are happening.

His first impression was a jumble—eyes, scurrying movement, and bulk. Then things started to shape up. About ten feet back from the entrance was a huge, flattish, naked, scabrous bulk, pimpled with finger-sized teats. Clustered around and behind this were a tangle of slinging units, carrier units, observation units. Some had their mouths fixed to teats.

For a long second or two the scene stayed frozen.

Then the front edge of the bulk split and began to gape. Ed found himself looking down a manhole-sized gullet into a shallow puddle of slime with bits of bone sticking up here and there. Toward the near end a soggy mass of fur that

might have been the rabbit seemed to be visibly melting down. At the same moment, the tangle of lesser monsters sorted themselves out and a wave of stingers came boiling out at him.

Ed dropped the flashlight, gave two mighty pumps of the bug gun, and jumped clear of the entrance. For a moment, the den mouth boiled with stingers, hissing and bucking in agony. Ed sprayed them heavily again, snatched up his rifle, and ran, looking back over his shoulder. The stingers showed no inclination to follow, though, the tobacco juice seemed to be keeping them well occupied for the moment.

Halfway home, Ed had to stop and rest for a moment while he took a spell of shuddering and gagging as a sudden picture of the slimy gullet came into his mind, with Ed Brown laying where the rabbit had been, melting down into a stinking soup of bones and gobbets of flesh.

When he got to the hole, his arrangement of tin cans, traps, and tobacco juice no longer looked nearly as secure as it had. He got his ax and cut two stout posts, framing the hole; built a stout slab door and hung it from them. Then he drove stakes close together at the threshold, to foil any attempts to dig under, and trimmed a sill tight to the door.

His feeling in this matter, as it happened, was sound.

The Harn was beginning to develop a pretty strong dislike for Ed Brown. Three of its stinging units were dead, and most of the rest were in poor shape, thanks to the tobacco spray. It had got a little whiff of the stuff itself, not enough to do any serious damage ordinarily, but right now, so close to swarming time—

Ed was going to have to go.

So far, in this world, the Harn had needed only the three basic types of mobile units. There were other standard types, however, for dealing with more complicated situations. As it happened, a couple of carrier embryos were at just about the right stage. With a little forcing, they could be brought on in not too long a time. Meanwhile, the Harn would do what it could with the material available.

When Ed came through the next day to set his snares, the Harn was prepared to test his snakeproof pants. They held, which was disconcerting to the Harn, but it was a hard creature to convince, once thoroughly aroused. Ed was not too sure of how well the pants would stand up to persistent assault himself. After the third ambush, he took to spraying suspicious looking spots with tobacco juice. He shot two more stingers in this way, but it slowed him up quite a bit. It took him all day to make four sets.

In the next three days he made a dozen sets and caught two carriers. Then, the fourth day, as he adjusted a snare, a seeming root suddenly came to life and slashed at his hand. He was wearing gloves to keep his scent from the snares, and the fang caught the glove and just grazed the ball of his left thumb. The hatchet he

had been using to cut a toggle was lying by his knee. He snatched it up and chopped the stinger before it could strike again, then yanked off the glove and looked at his hand. A thin scratch, beaded with drops of blood, showed on the flesh. Unhesitatingly, he drew the razor edge of the hatchet across it, sucked and spat, sucked and spat again and again. Then he started for home.

He barely made it. By the time he got to the hole, he was a very sick man. He latched the door, stumbled into the cabin and fell on the bed.

It was several days before he was able to be about again, his hand still partly paralyzed.

During that time, the situation changed. The Harn took the offensive.

Ed's first notice of this was a rhythmic crashing outside the cabin. He managed to crawl to where he could see the gate he had built to block the hole into the other world. It was shaking from repeated batterings from the other side. Dragging his rifle with his good hand, he scrabbled down to where he could see through the chinks in the slab door. Two of the carrier units were there, taking turns slamming their full weight against it. He had built that gate skookum, but not to take something like that.

He noted carefully where they were hitting it, then backed off twenty feet and laid the .450 across a log. He let them hit the door twice more to get the timing before he loosed off a shot, at the moment of impact. The battering stopped abruptly, and through the chinks he could see a bulk piled against the gate.

For a while there was no more action. Then, after a few tentative butts at the door, the battering started again. This time, Ed wasn't so lucky. The battering stopped when he fired, but he got an impression that the carrier ran off. He thought he might have hit it, but not mortally.

In an hour or so the Harn was back, and it kept coming back. Ed began to worry about his ammunition, which was not unlimited. Ordinarily, two or three boxes lasted him through the winter. He got his .30-06, for which he had a sugar sack full of military ammunition. The light full-patch stuff did not have the discouraging effect of the .450, though, and he had to shoot a lot oftener.

Another thing, he wasn't getting any rest, which was bad in his already weakened condition. Every time he dozed off the battering would start again, and he would have to wake up and snap a few shots through the door. He held pretty much on one spot, not wanting to shoot the door to pieces, but the Harn noticed this, and started hitting the door in other places.

The second day of the attack, the door came down. It had been pretty shaky for some time, and Ed had got the cabin ready for a siege, filling butter kegs with water and nailing up the windows. As the Harn poured through, he shot several and then broke for the cabin. A carrier ran at him full tilt, bent on bowling him over. Once off his feet, he would have been easy meat for one of the stingers. He

sidestepped, swung his shotgun up in one hand—he had kept it handy for the close fighting—and blew the carrier's spine in half. He had to kick it aside to slam the cabin door.

For a few minutes, then, things were pretty hectic. Ed went from one to another of the loopholes he had cut, blasting first with the shotgun as the Harn crowded around, then using the .30 as they grew more cautious.

After the first rush, it was obvious to the Harn that the cabin was going to be a tough nut to crack. On the other hand, there was no rush about it either. Necessarily, it had let its hunting go the past several days while it concentrated on Ed. It was pretty hungry, and it was in rich pickings now—Ed had always kept from disturbing game close to the cabin, partly because he liked to see it around, and partly because he had an idea that some day he might be in a fix where he couldn't travel very well, and would want meat close to hand. The Harn felt no such compunctions. The stinging units spread through the woods, and shortly a steady procession of loaded carriers began to stream back through the hole. Ed picked off the first few, but then the Harn found it could route them up the river trail in such a way that he got only a glimpse as they flashed through the hole. After that he did not hit very many.

Ed stopped shooting. He was getting short on ammunition for the .30 now, too. He counted up. There were eighteen rounds for the .450, half a box of 220 grain soft point for the .30 plus about the same amount of military stuff, and a handful of shotgun shells. Of course, there was still the .30 Luger with a couple of boxes, and the .22; but they were not much account for this kind of work.

He looked at the cabin door. It was stout, built of hewed three-inch slabs, but it wouldn't last forever against the kind of beating the gate had got. Even if it did, he was going to run out of water eventually.

Ed thought about that for a while, sitting at the table staring at the little pile of cartridges. He was going to be run out of here sooner or later, he might as well pick his own time, and now seemed about as good as any, while the Harn was busy exploring and hunting.

He sighed and got up to rummage around the cabin. The snakeproof pants had done real good, but he did not trust them entirely. There was some sheet iron laid over the ceiling joists, which he had brought up to make new stoves for his line camps. He got this down and cut it into small pieces. Around the edges he drilled a number of small holes. Then he got out his mending gear and began sewing the plates, in an overlapping pattern, to the legs of the snakeproof pants and to an old pair of moccasins. When he finished, he was pretty well armored as far as his crotch. It was an awkward outfit to move around in, but as long as he was able to stay on his feet, he figured he would be reasonably secure from the stingers. As for the bigger ones, he would just have to depend on seeing them first,

and the .450.

Next, he needed some gasoline. The fuel cache was under a big spruce, about twenty yards from the door. He made the round of his loopholes. There were no Harn in sight, they were apparently ignoring him for now. He slipped out the door, closing it securely behind him, and started for the cache.

As he stepped out, a stinger came from under the sill log and lashed at his foot. He killed it with the ax beside the door, saving a cartridge, and went on, walking fairly fast but planting his feet carefully, a little awkward in his armor. He picked up a five-gallon can of gas, a quart of motor oil, and the twenty feet of garden hose he used for siphoning gas down the bank to the boat. On the way back, another stinger hit him. He kicked it aside, not wanting to set down his load, and it came at him again and again. Just outside the door, he finally caught it under a heel and methodically trampled it to death. Then he snatched open the door, tossed the stuff inside, and pulled it quickly shut behind him.

So far, good enough.

He lashed the gas can solidly to his packboard, slipped the end of the hose into the flexible spout and wired it tight. Then he cut up an old wool undershirt and wrapped the pieces around miscellaneous junk—old nuts and bolts, chunks of leadline, anything to make up half a dozen packages of good throwing heft. He soaked these in oil and stowed them in a musette bag which he snapped to the D-rings of the pack.

One of the metal plates on his moccasin was hanging by a thread, probably he had torn it loose in the scuffle at the door. They weren't going to take too much kicking and banging around, he could see, and once he was on his way, it wouldn't be a very good idea to be caught bending over with his bare hands at ground level to fix them. On the other hand, he couldn't be using all his cartridges on the stingers, either, he had to save them for the carriers. He thought about this some while mending the moccasin, and decided to take the bug gun. It might not kill the stingers, but it ought to discourage them enough so they wouldn't keep pestering him.

With his bad left arm, he had trouble getting the pack on his back. He finally managed by swinging it up on the table first. It was not too much of a load, forty or fifty pounds he guessed. Still, shaky as he was, it was about as much as he could manage. He had intended to just try it on for size, but after he got it up he thought: well, why not now? He picked up the .450, stowed the extra cartridges in his pocket, checked to make sure he had matches, hung the bug gun on his belt, and opened the door.

It was just getting dusk, but the other world was in broad daylight, the days and nights were almost completely reversed again. As he stepped through the hole, the first stinger struck. He gave it a good squirt of tobacco juice. It went

bucking and twisting off and he went on, stepping carefully and solidly.

Luckily, most of the Harn was foraging in the new world. Two more stingers ambushed him, but the tobacco juice got rid of them, and he had no serious trouble till he got close to the den. Two carriers came out and rushed him there. He shot them both and then killed the stinger that was pecking at his shins. He moved quickly now, he had an idea that in about a minute all hell would break loose. He swung the pack down on the uphill side of the den, wet the musette bag with a quick spray of gas, tossed it over his shoulder, jammed the free end of the hose into the den mouth and stabbed the can with his knife to vent it. As the gas poured into the den he lit one of his oil and gas soaked bombs and ran around in front, lighting one after another from the one in his hand and tossing them into the den. The musette bag caught fire and he snatched it from his shoulder and tossed it after the bombs. A whoof and a sheet of flame blew out.

About fifty yards away there was a slender, popplelike tree. Ed had thought if he could make that, he would be reasonably secure while the Harn burned. He ran for it as hard as he could, beating at the flames that had spattered on him from the burning gas, but he never made it.

Harn were erupting everywhere. A carrier suddenly came charging out of the brush to his left. While Ed dealt with that one, the Harn played its ace in the hole. The two special units it had been developing to deal with Ed were not quite done yet, but they were done enough to work for the few minutes the Harn needed them. Ed heard a coughing grunt behind him and spun around to see something new crawling out of the flame and smoke at the den entrance.

This one was a roughly carrier shaped creature, but half again as large, built for killing. It had powerful fanged jaws and its eight feet were armed with knifelike, disemboweling claws. As it came at Ed in a lumbering rush, another came crawling out after it.

Ed shot four times, as fast as he could work the action. The heavy slugs did the job, but not quite well enough. With its dying lunge the thing got to him and tossed him ten feet like a rag doll. He lit on his bad hand and felt the wrist bones go.

As he struggled to get up, digging his elbow in and using one hand, he saw a stinger darting in at him. He had lost both the bug gun and his rifle when the fighting unit swiped him. He swiveled on his hips and kicked the stinger away. Then he saw the second fighting unit coming. He forgot about the stinger. It still might get to him, but, if it did, it would be too late to matter.

He drew his knife, managed to get to one knee, and crouched there like an old gray rat, stubbly lips drawn back from worn teeth in a grin of pain and rage. This was one he wasn't going to win, he guessed.

Ten feet away, the fighting unit suddenly ran down like a clockwork toy. It

toppled over, skidded past him under its own momentum, and lay there kicking spasmodically. Ed glared at it uncomprehendingly. It arched its neck back to almost touch its haunches, stiffened, and was still.

Ed looked around. The stinger was dead too, three feet from his shoulder, and half a dozen more which had been making for him. A cloud of greasy, stinking smoke was rolling out of the den. The Harn was dead.

Ed put his knife away and lay back. He did not quite pass out, but things got pretty dim.

After a while he got hold of himself and sat up. He was not too surprised to see the man in forest green prodding at the bodies of the fighting units. The stranger looked at the smoke still oozing from the den and nodded approvingly. Then he came over and looked at Ed. He clacked his tongue in concern and bent over, touching Ed's wrist. Ed noticed there was now a cast on it, and it didn't hurt so much. There was also a plastic binding around his ribs and shoulder, where the claws of the first fighter had raked as it tossed him. That was a mighty neat trick, because the rags of his shirt were still buttoned around him, and he was pretty sure it had not been off at any time.

The stranger smiled at Ed, patted him on the shoulder, and disappeared. He seemed to be a busy sort of fellow, Ed thought, with not much time for visiting.

Ed felt quite a bit better now, enough better to gather up what was left of his gear and start home. He was glad to find old Tom waiting for him there. The cat had taken to the woods when the attack on the gate first started, he didn't like shooting, and Ed had worried that the Harn might have got him.

Ed slept till noon the next day, got up and cooked a dozen flapjacks and a pound of bacon. After breakfast, he sat around for an hour or so drinking coffee. Then he spent the rest of the afternoon puttering around the cabin.

He packed away the snakeproof pants, disassembled the flame-thrower, picked up the traps by the hole.

Old Tom seemed to have pretty well cleaned up the mice under the lean-to. Ed took his shovel and filled in the hole he had dug for the cat to get at them.

He went to bed early. Tomorrow he would take a long hike around the new world, scout out the fur and game, plan his trap-line and pick cabin sites.

The next morning, though, the hole into the other world was gone.

The posts which had marked it were sheared neatly in half. The remains of the door still hung there, battered and sagging; but it swung open on nothing but Alaska, when Ed stepped through he found himself standing beside the old leaning birch.

He tried it several times before he convinced himself.

He walked slowly back toward the cabin, feeling old and uncertain, not quite

knowing what to do with himself. Old Tom was over by the lean-to, sniffing and pawing tentatively at the fresh earth where Ed had filled in the hole. As Ed came up, he came over to rub against Ed's leg.

They went into the cabin and Ed started fixing breakfast.

THE CAVERN OF THE SHINING ONES

Layroh's hiring of husky down-and-outers for his expedition is part of a plan made ages past.

It was shortly after midnight when a persistent nightmare aroused Don Foster from sleep. For a moment he lay drowsily in his blankets there on the sand, with memory of the nightmare still vivid.

It had been a monstrous flying thing like a giant blue-bottle fly that he had been battling in his sleep. Memory of the thing's high-pitched, droning buzz still rang in his ears. Then abruptly he realized that the peculiar buzzing was no mere echo of a nightmare. It was an actual sound that still vibrated from somewhere within the camp.

Startled into full awakening, Foster propped himself up on one elbow. The sound was penetrating, but not particularly loud. He was apparently the only one whom it had awakened. In the gray gloom of the desert starlight he saw the blanket-shrouded figures of the rest of the men still deep in slumber.

He realized the source of the sound now. It came from inside the black walls of Layroh's tent, pitched there in its usual isolation on a slight rise fifty yards from the sleeping group. Foster grunted disgustedly to himself. More of Layroh's scientific hocus-pocus! The man seemed to go out of his way to add new phases of mystery to this crazy expedition of his through the barren wastelands of the Mojave.

For a solid week now they had been working their way back and forth over a thirty-mile stretch of desert, while Layroh labored with his intricate instruments searching for something known only to himself. Whatever reason Layroh had for recruiting a party of fifteen to accompany him was still a mystery. So far the men had done practically nothing except trail along after Layroh while he worked with his apparatus.

It was a state of affairs that caused the men little worry. As long as they had enough to eat they were quite content. They were down-and-outers, all of them, human derelicts recruited from the park benches and cheap flop houses of Los Angeles. They had only one thing in common: all of them were large and powerful men.

Don Foster was the youngest of the fifteen, and the only college man in the group. A succession of bad breaks had finally landed him broke and hungry on a park bench, where Layroh found him. Layroh's offer of ten dollars a day and all expenses had seemed a godsend. Foster had promptly jumped at the offer. Layroh's peculiar conditions and rules had seemed trivial details at the time.

Foster scowled as he lit a cigarette and stared through the gloom at the violet-lighted tent from which the disturbing sound still came. Seven days of experience with Layroh's peculiarities had begun to make them a little irritating. His sternly enforced code of rules was simple enough. Never approach Layroh unless called. Never touch Layroh's instruments. Never approach Layroh's tent. Never ask questions.

Layroh neither ate with the men nor mingled with them in any way that could possibly be avoided. As soon as they made camp each night he set up his small black tent and remained inside it until camp was broken the next morning. No one knew whether the man ever slept. All night long the violet light glowed inside the black tent. The men had wondered about the unusual color of that light, then had finally decided it was probably something required by the same eye weakness that made Layroh wear heavily smoked goggles, both day and night.

Strange sounds in the night as Layroh worked with his apparatus in the black tent were nothing unusual, but to-night was the first time that Foster had ever heard this peculiar whining buzz. As he listened it rose in a sudden thin crescendo that rippled along his spine like a file rasping over naked nerve-ends. For one shuddering second there seemed to be an intangible living quality in that metallic drone, as though some nameless creature sang in horrible exultance. Then abruptly the sound ceased.

Foster drew a deep breath of relief and ground his cigarette into the sand beside him. Better try to get to sleep again before Layroh started some new disturbance with his infernal apparatus.

He was just settling down into his blankets when a movement in the tent drew his attention back to it. Layroh was apparently changing the position of the violet light, for his tall figure was suddenly silhouetted against the tent wall in sharp relief.

Foster started in surprise as another figure loomed darkly beside that of Layroh. For a moment he thought that the unprecedented had happened and some member of the expedition was inside those jealously guarded tent walls with Layroh. Then he saw that the figure must be a mere trick of the shadows cast by the moving light upon some piece of luggage. It looked like the torso of a man, but the head was a shapeless blob and the arms were nothing more than boneless dangling flaps. A moment later the light moved on and both shadows vanished.

Foster grinned sheepishly over the momentary start the distorted shadow

had given him, and determinedly rolled himself in his blankets to sleep. It was after sunrise when he awoke. The rest of the camp was already up, but there was one member of the party missing.

Jeff Peters' empty blankets were still spread there on the sand, but no one had seen the big Negro since the camp turned in the night before. The expedition's daily travels under the blazing sun of the Mojave never had appealed particularly to Jeff, and he had apparently at last made good his repeated threats to desert.

The men were just getting up from breakfast when Layroh finished packing his tent and apparatus in his sedan, and started down toward the camp. As usual, he halted some five yards away from them, standing there for a moment in stony silence.

Physically, the man was a giant, towering well over six feet in height. On several occasions when the expedition's cars had stalled in deep sand he had strikingly demonstrated the colossal strength in his tall body.

His aquiline features, his red-bronze complexion, and his long black hair, were all suggestive of Incan or Mayan ancestry. No one had ever seen any trace of feeling or emotion upon his impassive features. Foster would have given a good deal for just one glimpse of the eyes hidden behind the dark-colored goggles. In their depths he might be able to find some reason for the tingling surge of nameless dread that Layroh's close approach always inspired.

Layroh noted Jeff Peters' absence at once. "We seem to have our first deserter," he commented evenly. His voice was as richly resonant as the tone of some fine old violin. He hesitated almost imperceptibly between words, like one to whom English was not a native tongue.

"It does not matter," he continued indifferently. "We can spare one man easily enough. To-day we shall continue toward the east. Pack the truck at once. We are ready to start."

Without waiting for an answer, he turned and strode back to the sedan. A curious thought struck Foster as he stared after Layroh's retreating figure. What if the oddly distorted shadow he had seen against the tent wall last night had really been that of a man—had been that of Jeff Peters?

For only a moment did Foster mull over the idea. Then he promptly dismissed it as being absurd. He could imagine no possible reason for Jeff Peters being in Layroh's tent in the middle of the night. The shadow had been only remotely like that of a man, anyway. There had been neither head nor arms to the figure, only shapeless masses totally unlike anything human.

They finished packing the breakfast stuff in the supply truck, and the party started out along the trail with Layroh's sedan leading the way. For nearly two hours they followed their usual routine, working steadily eastward and stopping at regular intervals while Layroh made his methodical tests with his instruments.

Then near the end of the second hour something happened that abruptly sent a thrill of excitement through the entire expedition. Layroh had just set his apparatus up on a small sand dune beside the trail. The mechanism looked somewhat like a portable radio, with two slender parallel rods on top and a number of dials on the main panel.

Layroh swung the rods slowly around the horizon while he carefully tuned the various dials. It was when the rods pointed toward the southeast that there suddenly came the first response he had ever received. From somewhere within the mechanism there came a faint staccato ripple of clear beauty like countless tiny hammers beating upon a crystal gong.

The sound galvanized Layroh into the nearest approach to emotion anyone had ever seen him display. The giant moved with the furious speed of a madman as he returned the apparatus to the sedan and swung the car out across the sand toward the southeast. After a mile he stopped and hurriedly set the apparatus up again. This time the crystalline signal came in with a noticeable increase in volume.

From then on the progress of the party became a mad dash that taxed the endurance of everyone except Layroh himself. After the first hour they entered a terrain so rugged that the cars had to be abandoned and they fought their way forward on foot. Layroh was forced to turn the radiolike apparatus over to one of the men, while he himself carried another mechanism that consisted of a heavy silver cylinder with four flexible nozzles emerging from one end.

They held as rigidly as possible to a straight line toward the southeast, scrambling over whatever obstacles intervened. Their only stops were at regular intervals when Layroh checked their course. Each time the crystalline signal came in with greater volume.

Their objective appeared to be a cone-shaped peak several miles ahead that loomed up high above the surrounding rock masses. The oddly shaped mountain was identified by one of the men who had once been a Mojave desert rat.

"Lodestone Peak," he announced succinctly. "Full of iron, or somethin'. A compass always goes haywire within a radius of ten miles of it."

It was early afternoon when they finally arrived at a level area at the base of the mountain. For the last two miles Layroh had not stopped long enough to make any tests. Now he set the radiolike apparatus in place some ten yards from the face of a sheer cliff that towered high above them.

The crystalline signal came in a rippling flood. He spun the dials. The sound ceased, and the pointing rods glowed with an aura of amber light at their tips. Swift and startling answer came from deep within the heart of the cliff, a mighty note of sonorous beauty like the violent plucking of a string on some colossal bass viol. So powerful was the timbre of the pulsing sound that the entire side of the

mountain seemed to vibrate in harmony with it.

Layroh snapped off the apparatus and the sound ceased. Carefully searching until he found a certain spot on the cliff face, he stepped close to it and unlimbered the nozzles of the silver cylinder. Foster noted that at the place selected by Layroh there was a five-foot-wide stratum of slightly lighter-colored rock extending from the sand to a point high up on the cliff face.

From the metal nozzles of the cylinder there spurted a broad beam of dead black. There was a searing flash of blue-white flame as the black beam struck the cliff face. There followed a brief second during which the rock melted into nothingness in the heart of that area of blue radiance. Then the stabbing beam bored steadily on back into the cliff like the flame of a blow torch melting a way through a block of butter.

Layroh adjusted the nozzles until the black beam was a solid shaft of opacity seven feet in height and nearly five in width. The hole in the cliff became a tunnel from which blue radiance surged outward in a shimmering mist as the black beam steadily bit deeper into the rock.

"Follow me," Layroh ordered the men, "but do not approach too close."

He stepped forward and entered the mouth of the tunnel. Shaken by the spectacular thing occurring before their eyes, yet, driven by curiosity as to what might lie at the end of that swift-forming tunnel, the men came crowding obediently after him. A moment later they were within the passage, stumbling dazedly forward through the billowing fog of bluish radiance. There was an odd, almost electric, tingle of exhilaration in that radiant mist as it surged about their bodies.

Fragments of almost-forgotten scientific lore flitted through Foster's brain as he groped for a clue to the action of the strange ray. Not quite complete disintegration of matter, but something very close to it—probably the transformation of matter into radiant energy, an ingenious harnessing of the same forces that are forever at work in the cosmic crucibles of the universe's myriad suns.

The action of the black ray was amazingly rapid. They were forced to hurry forward at a fast walk to keep their distance behind Layroh. The vertical stratum of lighter-colored rock continued straight back into the heart of the mountain. It apparently served as a guide. The color of the blue flame-mist changed perceptibly whenever Layroh allowed the black ray to stray into the rock at either side of it.

For nearly two hundred yards they bored their way steadily into the mountain, their path gradually sloping downward. The walls and floor of the swift-forming tunnel were as smooth and hard as though glazed with a film of diamond.

Then abruptly Layroh shut the black ray projector off as the rock ahead of them ended and they broke through into another larger tunnel, dimly lighted by small globes of violet radiance set at intervals in the glassy ceiling. After thirty

yards of travel along this tunnel they found their way barred by a massive door of copper-colored metal.

At Layroh's imperious gesture the men halted a dozen feet back of him in the tunnel while he brought something out of his leather belt-case. Foster was the only one of the group who was near enough to see that the object was a small tube closely resembling a pocket flashlight.

The only break in the surface of the great door was a six-inch disk over near its right-hand edge. Layroh slid this disk aside. Into the opening that was revealed he sent a series of flashes of colored light from the tube—two red, three green, and two blue. The colors were the combination to the light-activated mechanism of the lock. At the last of the blue flashes there was a whirring of hidden mechanism and the portal swung slowly and ponderously open.

Layroh beckoned to the men to follow him as he strode swiftly on into a vast room that was flooded with bluish light from scores of the radiant globes. As the men passed through the door it reached the limit of its opening swing and began automatically closing again behind them, but they were too completely engrossed in the scene before them to notice it.

They were in a great cavern whose glass-smooth floor was nearly a hundred yards square, and whose ceiling was so high that it was lost in the shadows above the maze of metal girders and cables that made a webwork some forty feet overhead. There was a feeling of almost incredible age about the place, as though it had been sealed away there in the heart of the mountain for countless centuries.

On every hand there was evidence that the cavern and all its contents were the products of a race of beings whose science was one that was utterly strange to that of the modern world. At the end of the room where they stood were row after row of different machines, great engines with bodies of dull silver metal and with stiltlike legs and jointed arms that made them look like giant metal insects. Foster could understand few of the details of the machines, but he felt that in efficiency and versatility they were far ahead of Earth's best modern efforts.

Grouped together in the center of the cavern were many assemblies of apparatus linked together by small cables that descended from main cables in the girder-crisscrossed ceiling overhead. There was a soft hissing of sparks leaping between terminals and a steady glow from oddly shaped tubes which indicated that the mechanisms were still functioning in silent and efficient performance of their unknown tasks.

The piece of apparatus nearest the door was an upright skeleton framework of slender pillars housing in their center a cluster of coils set around a large drumlike diaphragm. Foster wondered if this were not the signal device with which Layroh had tuned in his own portable instrument. The principal piece of mechanism in the central space, however—a great crystal-walled case filled with an in-

tricate array of rods and wires—was something at whose purpose Foster could not even guess.

Layroh strode on past the central apparatus toward the back wall. The men followed him. Then as they rounded the apparatus and saw for the first time the incredible things lining that rear wall, tier upon tier, they stopped short in utter stupefaction. Before them was Life, but Life so hideously and abysmally alien that their brains reeled in horror.

Great shining slugs slumbered there by the hundreds in their boxlike crystal cells, their gelatinous bodies glowing with pale and ever-changing opalescence. The things were roughly pear-shaped, with the large end upward. Deep within this globular portion glowed a large nucleus spot of red. From the tapering lower part of each slug's body there sprouted scores of long slender tendrils like the gelatinous fringe of a jelly-fish.

The things measured nearly four feet in height. Each was suspended upright in an individual glass-walled cell, its body supported by a loop of wire that dropped from larger cables running between each row of cells. There was steady and exhaustless power of some kind coursing through those cables. Where they branched at the end of each cell-row there was a small unit of glowing tubes and silver terminals whose tips glowed with faint auras of leaping sparks.

The slugs were dormant now but the regular changes in the opalescent sheen which coursed over their bodies like the slow breathing of a sleeping animal, gave mute evidence that life was still in those grotesque forms, waiting only to be awakened.

Fascinated by the tiers of glowing things, one of the men started slowly forward with a hand outstretched as though to touch one of the cells. His advance aroused Layroh to swift action. The bronze-faced giant whirled and swung the nozzles of the black ray projector into line with the man.

"Back, yaharigan, back!" he ordered imperiously. "The Shining Ones have slumbered, undisturbed for a thousand centuries. They shall not awake from their long sleep to find the filthy fingers of a yaharigan defiling their crystal cells. Back!"

Panic-stricken at the threat of the black ray, the man stumbled backward to join his fellows. Layroh's startling statement of the incredible age of the shining things in the cases erased all thought of the expedition's code of rules from Foster's mind.

"You mean that those—those things—moved and lived in the outside world a hundred thousand years ago?" he asked dazedly. "But there is no indication of there ever having been any such creatures among Earth's early forms of life."

"Fool!" There was angry disdain in Layroh's resonant voice. "They who slumber here are a race born far from this planet. They are the Shining Ones of Rikor. Rikor is a tiny planet circling a wandering sun whose orbit is an ellipse so vast that

only once in a hundred thousand years does it approach your solar system. Rikor's sun was nearly dead and the Shining Ones had to find a new home soon or else perish. Then their planet swung near the Earth, and their scouts returned with the news that Earth was ideally suited for their purpose. There were barely five hundred of the Shining Ones all told, and they migrated to Earth in a body."

"And they've been in this cavern ever since, sealed up like tadpoles in fish bowls?" The question came from Garrigan, a strapping sandy-haired Irishman whose first blind panic at the black ray's menace was swiftly giving way to curiosity.

"It was your ancestors who drove the Shining Ones into their retreat here," Layroh answered grimly. "When the Shining Ones arrived upon Earth they found the planet already in the possession of a race of human beings whose science was so far advanced that it compared favorably even with the science of Rikor. This race was comparatively few in numbers, and was concentrated upon a small island-continent known as Atlantis. Shining Ones and Atlanteans met in a war of titans, with a planet as the stake. The Shining Ones were vanquished in that first battle. They lost a fifth of their number and barely half a dozen of their smallest space ships escaped destruction.

"Planning a new and decisive assault, the Shining Ones planted atomic mines throughout the foundations of Atlantis. But the Atlanteans struck first by a matter of hours. At a set moment every volcanic vent on the Earth's surface belched forth colossal volumes of a green gas. Though that gas was harmless to creatures of Earth, it meant slow but certain death to all Rikorians. Furiously the Shining Ones struck their own blow, setting off the cataclysmic explosion that sank Atlantis forever beneath the waters of the Atlantic. Scarcely a handful of Atlanteans escaped, but Rikor's victory was a hollow one. Earth's air was so thoroughly poisoned that it would require centuries of slow ionization by sunlight to again make it fit for Rikorian breathing. The Shining Ones had at most three months before the slow poison would weaken their bodies to the danger point."

"Why didn't they go back to their own planet, then, where they belonged?" broke in the truculent voice of Garrigan again.

"That was impossible," Layroh answered impatiently. "The few space ships they had left would carry barely a score, and Rikor's sun was already so far advanced in its swing away from Earth that there would be time for only one trip. There was only one chance for survival remaining to them. They knew of a process of suspended animation in which their bodies could survive almost indefinitely without being harmed by the Atlantean gas. They would require outside aid to be awakened from that dormant state, so a small group of them must remain active and embark for Rikor, to try to survive there until Rikor returned near enough to the Earth for them to again cross the void.

"The dormant ones must have a retreat so well hidden that they would not be disturbed during the thousand centuries that must elapse before they could be awakened. The Shining Ones sped back to their base on the North American continent and in the three months remaining to them they prepared this cavern here in the heart of the mountain. Radium bulbs supplied its light. For the unfailing source of electrical energy needed to course through the dormant bodies and keep them alive they tapped the magnetic field of the planet itself, the force produced as the Earth rotates in the sun's electrical field like an armature spinning within the coils of a dynamo."

It was Foster who broke in with the question that was in the thoughts of the entire party. "Just where do you come in on all this?" he asked bluntly. "And what was your reason for bringing us here?"

There was blazing contempt in Layroh's rich voice as he turned toward Foster. "Yaharigan of Earth!" he jeered. "Your brain is as stupid as the feeble brains of those true yaharigans of Rikor whose physical structure your human bodies so closely resemble. Have you not guessed yet that I am no contemptible creature of Earth—that this human shell I wear is nothing but a cleverly contrived disguise? Look, yaharigans, look upon the real face of the one who has come to restore the Earth to its rightful masters!"

With a single swift movement, Layroh snatched the colored goggles from his face and flung them aside. There was a smothered gasp of horror from the group. They saw now why Layroh had always worn those concealing lenses. There were no eyes in that bronzed face, nothing but two empty sockets. And from deep within the skull there glowed through those gaping sockets a seething pool of lurid red—the nucleus spot of a Shining One!

Reeling backward with the rest of the men from the horror of the glowing thing within the skull, Foster dazedly heard Layroh's resonant voice ring exultantly on: "My ancestors were among the twenty Shining Ones who remained active. After placing their comrades in their long sleep those twenty survivors set up signal apparatus in the cavern so that it could be found again no matter how much the outside terrain might change. Then they filled in the entrance tunnel with synthetic rock and embarked for Rikor.

"There upon that dying planet generations passed. When the time came that Rikor's sun again neared Earth, so rigorous had life become upon Rikor that only six Rikorians remained alive. In order to increase our chances of winning through on the perilous trip to Earth, each of us traveled in a separate space ship. The precaution was well taken. We encountered a dense cloud of meteors near Alpha Centauri and I was the only survivor."

Layroh gestured briefly toward the rows of many-armed metal engines. "There are the normal vehicles for a Shining One's body—armored machines

powered by sub-atomic motors and with appendages equipped for every task of peace or war. This synthetic human figure which I now wear was donned only in order that I might have no difficulty in mingling with Earthmen while I sought the cavern. It is an exact replica of the body of an Atlantean, including artificial vocal chords. Even the colored goggles necessary to hide the glowing red of my nucleus are similar to those worn by Atlantean scientists while working with their ray machines—"

Layroh was abruptly interrupted by a scream of maniacal fury from Olsen, a shambling Swede who stood near the edge of the group. Ever since Layroh's unmasking the Swede had been staring at him with eyes rigidly wide in terror like those of a bird confronting a snake. The steady contemplation of the horror of the blaring red thing behind Layroh's empty eye-sockets had apparently at last driven the Swede completely insane. He snatched a revolver from his belt as he leaped forward, and fired once. His shot struck Layroh in the forehead.

The bullet ripped through the surface of Layroh's face, then glanced harmlessly aside as it struck metal underneath. Layroh never even staggered from the impact. The black ray from the projector caught Olsen before he could fire again. There was a searing flash of flame, then a swiftly melting cloud of blue-white radiance, and the Swede was gone.

Layroh swung the projector back to menace the others. "I had forgotten that yaharigans of Earth have weapons that might be annoying," he said evenly. "Two more of you have pistols—Garrigan and Ransome. Toss them away from you at once. Hesitate—and the black ray speaks again."

Sullenly the two men obeyed his order.

"Good," commended Layroh. "In the pits where you are going you will have little use for pistols. When I again take you from those pits you will quickly learn why I brought you with me. Yaharigans, I have called you, and yaharigans you shall be—Earthly counterparts of those miserable beasts of Rikor who have for ages been bred only for the one purpose of supplying food for the Shining Ones. I knew that when I found the cavern the process of awakening the Shining Ones would require that they be carefully fed with the calcium and lime from the bones of living yaharigans, the normal food of all Rikorians.

"The few yaharigans I had brought from Rikor were consumed on my long trip to Earth. So I had to recruit a party of human beings to go with me and serve as the necessary food for the Shining Ones. My search for the cavern took longer than I had expected for I knew only its approximate location. My own body at last had to have sustenance. Last night the Negro, Jeff Peters, provided that sustenance.

"I shall feed those of you who remain to the first group of Shining Ones to be awakened. After that we shall be strong enough in numbers to sally forth and capture ample food for awakening the rest of our comrades. Then in our full strength

we shall emerge and again become masters of a planet upon which your crude race shall exist only as yaharigan herds for our sustenance."

Layroh's resonant voice ceased. Keeping the black ray projector alertly covering the men, he strode over to a closed metal door in the wall just beyond them. He took a small tube from a rack beside it and opened the door by sending a flash of yellow light into the mechanism of its lock.

"Into the pits until I am ready for you," he commanded curtly. "They were first constructed for keeping our own yaharigans while we were working in the cavern, and they should serve just as well for you."

With the memory of Olsen's tragic fate still fresh in their minds, the men obediently filed into the next room, with Layroh bringing up the rear. The room was little more than a single large cell carved from the living rock, and lighted by a single radium bulb in the ceiling.

Its smooth glasslike floor was broken at intervals of ten feet by circular pits fifteen feet deep. At Layroh's order the men entered the floor-pits, one man to each pit. As Foster lowered himself into one of them he saw how grimly efficient a trap the pit was.

An unusually tall and active man might be able to jump high enough to touch the edge, but the effort would be useless. Those glass-smooth edges were so cunningly rounded that they offered no possible purchase for clutching fingers. The diameter of the pit, ten feet, was too great to permit any effort at climbing by wedging one's body between two opposing walls.

Layroh sent every man into the pits but one.

"You will return to the cavern with me, Carter," he ordered. "I have need for you at once."

They heard the door clang shut as Layroh and Carter left the pit room. Chaos reigned as the men flung their bodies against the pit walls in efforts to escape. There was the click of metal as several of them tried with pocket knives to chip finger-holes in the walls, but the glassy surfaces were of diamond hardness.

Foster's brain was numb with despair as he began to realize the true meaning of those sleeping things out in the cavern. Death in some unknown and horrible form was imminent for himself and his companions, he knew, but his thoughts were going far beyond that, to the time when the Shining Ones would emerge in all their resistless power to ravage and conquer a helpless world.

There could be little doubt as to the futility of Earth's best efforts against the advanced science of these invaders from far-off Rikor. Encased in their colossal machine-bodies of glittering metal, and armed with such terrible weapons as the black ray projector, the Shining Ones would be as invulnerable as men trampling an anthill underfoot.

The future status of mankind upon the Earth would be that of vast herds of

human yaharigans, probably bred for ever greater bone content as men breed cattle for superior food values. The picture aroused Foster to a fury of cold desperation. If they could only escape from the pits there might be a chance to trap Layroh and slay him before he brought those hordes of opalescent slugs to life. Then escape from the cavern itself would be an easy matter. Even if the outer door had been locked since they passed through it Layroh had the light-key and Foster remembered the combination.

Half a dozen wild schemes flitted through Foster's brain, only to be discarded as futile. Then suddenly he thought of something that had every chance of success if only they were given time enough. Layroh in his arrogance had forgotten that his prisoners were not naked brutes of Rikor. In the very clothing the men wore was the means of escape from the pits.

Foster's voice cut through the babel in the room until he gained everyone's attention.

"Our only chance for escape is to get a rope between two pits," he said curtly. "Then one man can climb out while the other holds the rope. We'll have to make that rope from our clothing. No one man can get a strip strong enough, so we'll have to work the strips to a central man who can braid them into a single heavy rope. I'm near the center. Get the strips to me. Tear your clothing into ribbons, and knot them together. Use your knives, watches, anything to weight one end of the strip. Then cast until you get contact with the pit next to you. That way all the strips can be worked to me."

A period of feverish activity followed while the men went to work. Layroh also was busy. Through several narrow ventilating slits high in the cavern wall they heard the hum of machinery.

The first of the men finished knotting their ropes together. With weighted ends muffled to deaden their fall upon the rock floor, they began casting to get contact with their neighbors.

Success came slowly. There were often scores of blind casts made before a weighted end came into an adjoining pit. But the time finally came when Foster had a twenty-five-foot length of rope strong enough to bear his weight. He already had a single strand making contact with Garrigan in the next pit. Garrigan drew the heavier rope in to him, then acted as an anchor while Foster climbed to the floor above.

His downstretched hand pulled Garrigan to freedom. Getting the other men up to the floor was the work of but a few moments. They were a weird-looking crew in the torn fragments of clothing that remained to them. Foster stationed them beside the locked cavern door so that they would be hidden behind it when it opened.

"Wait till Layroh is safely inside," he ordered, "then rush him. Get that black

ray thing out of commission first. Without that, we should be more than a match for him. In the meantime you come with me, Garrigan. Maybe we can get a look into the cavern."

By climbing on Garrigan's broad shoulders Foster found that he had a clear view through one of the narrow ventilating slits. Layroh had made efficient use of the time since he had left the pit room. Suspended from softly glowing wires in the large central glass case was a circular group of ten of the Shining Ones.

Foster's eyes widened in horror as he saw the object in which the trailing tendrils of the luminous slugs were sunk. It was the naked body of Carter. As those sucking tendrils drew out the substance of his skeleton, Carter's body was changing slowly, horribly, sinking into a flabby mass of puttylike flesh.

The dormant bodies of the great slugs glowed perceptibly brighter as they fed, and the pulsations of opalescence quickened. The Shining Ones were beginning to awaken. Faint but unmistakable there came to Foster's ears a low singing drone from the group.

He shuddered. He knew now why Jeff Peters' shadow had seemed so grotesquely boneless. That droning buzzing sound he had heard from the black tent had been the feeding cry of a Shining One—of Layroh. Then, his horrible feast ended, Layroh had blasted what remained of his victim into nothingness with the black ray.

Foster was abruptly startled into action as Layroh turned from watching the central case. Picking up the black ray projector, he started toward the pit-room door. Foster scrambled down. With Garrigan he joined the tensely waiting group beside the door.

There was the sound of the mechanism unlocking. The door opened and Layroh came striding in. In a concerted rush the men were upon him. Foster's hurtling dive for the black ray projector knocked the apparatus out of Layroh's hands. It crashed to the floor with a violence that left it shattered and useless. Swept off his feet by the savage fury of the unexpected attack, Layroh went to the floor beneath the writhing group of men.

The metal sinews of his magnificent body brought him to his knees in one mighty effort, but the numbers of his assailants were too great. Again he was beaten down while powerful hands tore at his limbs. The metal of the ingenious machine that was Layroh's body began twisting and giving way before the savagery of the assault.

He staggered to his feet, flinging the men aside in one last mad surge of power, and lurched toward the cavern. His effort to slam the door closed behind him was blocked by the swift leap of two of the men. Layroh staggered on into the cavern. Then suddenly the torn framework of his legs collapsed completely, and he fell heavily on his back.

The men surged forward with a shout of triumph. But before they could reach Layroh's prostrate figure one of his hands reached up and opened his skull as one opens the hinged halves of a box. From within the skull there rolled a great shining slug, a sinisterly beautiful figure of glowing opalescence, with a scarlet nucleus! For one breath-taken instant it rose to its full height of four feet, hesitated, as if warily regarding the horror-struck men, then with tendrils pressed into its body until it was nearly spherical, the slug that had been Layroh rolled like a ball of living fire across the cavern toward the cluster of machines. Foster snatched up one of the discarded pistols from the floor and fired twice at that hurtling globe of flame, but both shots missed.

A moment later the slug reached the machines. It fled swiftly past a group of smaller mechanisms and selected a gleaming metal colossus whose size and formidable armament indicated that it was designed primarily as an instrument of war. With whipping tendrils the slug swarmed up one of the metal legs and into a small crystal-walled compartment in the forward end of the machine.

There was the crackling hiss of unleashed sub-atomic forces somewhere within the metal body. The machine moved in fumbling uncertainty for a moment as the slug fought to get control of mechanism that had lain idle for a thousand centuries! Then swiftly full control came, and the machine came charging toward the men.

They broke in wild panic before the onslaught of the metal monster. As an engine of war it was invincible. Six feet in height and nearly twenty feet in length, it maneuvered upon its jointed legs with bewildering speed and efficiency. A score of rodlike arms projected from the main trunk, arms that were equipped for nearly every purpose. Some ended in pincers, others in barbed points, and others in clusters of flexible metal tentacles.

One of the men screamed in terror and broke for the door back into the pit room. Foster flung him aside and slammed the door shut and locked.

"You'd be trapped like a rat in there," he grated. "Our only chance is to stick together and fight it out."

It was a chance that seemed increasingly slight as they tried to close in upon the machine. Garrigan had recovered the other pistol from the floor. He emptied it into the metal monster at a range of less than ten feet but the bullets glanced harmlessly off as from armor plate.

The machine fought back with deadly efficiency. One of the dagger-pointed arms impaled a man like a speared fish. Pincers closed upon the neck of another, half tearing his head from his body. With the strength of desperation the men wrecked the pillars-and-diaphragm apparatus and from the debris tore metal fragments to serve as clubs. Their blows against the thing's pistonlike legs failed to even shake it. Two more men died before the grim efficiency of the stabbing arms.

Foster had held the remaining bullets in his own pistol, waiting for a chance to use them against some vulnerable spot in the machine, but he saw none. There was a bare chance that if he could gain the machine's back he might find some crevice through which he could send a telling shot. Cramming the pistol into his belt, he watched his chance, then used the debris of the wrecked apparatus as a stepping stone for a running leap that landed him solidly on top of the metal bulk just back of the crystal compartment.

He fumbled for the pistol in his belt, but before he could even touch it a tentacle-tipped arm lashed down toward him, picked him off the thing's back, and flung him with terrific force high into the air....

For a breathless moment he saw the girders and cables of the ceiling hurtling toward him. Instinctively he grabbed with both hands at one of the lower girders as his body thudded into it. His clutching fingers slipped momentarily, then held, leaving him dangling there at arms' length thirty feet above the floor.

His wits swiftly clearing from the shock of that mighty toss through space, Foster scrambled up on the narrow girder. Sitting astride the metal beam, he looked down at the scene below.

The battle down there was nearly over. The glowing slug in the machine was now obviously trying to capture the remaining men alive for further use. Instead of slaying, its lashing arms fought only to stun and cripple.

Six of the men still remained on their feet but they were trapped in an angle between heavy apparatus and one of the walls. In the central case the ten semi-dormant slugs, still too inactive to take part in the battle themselves, seemed watching the conflict with great unwinking eyes of crimson.

Foster groaned. The metal colossus was too powerful for their feeble efforts. It would take a bolt of lightning to have any effect upon that mighty engine of war. At the thought, Foster's heart leaped in sudden inspiration. There was lightning, the terrific electrical force of a spinning planet, in the cables up here among the girders, if he could only release it.

Slightly below his position and barely six feet away from him one of the main power cables of the cavern was suspended from heavy insulators. If the cable had ever had an insulating sheath around it the fabric had vanished during the centuries for the dull silver-colored metal was now completely bare.

If that naked cable could be dropped into contact with Layroh's machine-body, the entire power of one of the cavern's main lines would be grounded through the metal of the machine. The position of the cable with regard to where the machine was now, was perfect for the scheme. If Foster could sever the cable just opposite him there was an excellent chance that the longer one of the free ends would drop directly upon the machine.

And in his possession he had a possible means of severing that cable—the

pistol that was still crammed in his belt. There were four shots remaining in the pistol. The cable was barely half an inch thick, but the range was so short that he could not very well miss. If the silver-colored metal was as soft as it looked, the heavy bullets should be enough to tear through it.

Foster thrust the pistol as close to the cable as he could reach. Then, with the muzzle scarcely a yard from the silver strand, he fired. The heavy bullet caromed from the cable's surface, but not before it had torn a gash nearly a third of the way through it.

There was a sudden cessation of activity below as the slug in the machine looked up at the sound of the shot. Swift inspiration seized Foster and he promptly sent his next shot down at the machine itself. The bullet glanced harmlessly off, but his ruse worked. Apparently believing that Foster was merely trying another futile attack upon it, the machine turned its attention back to the men it had cornered. Foster could be attended to later.

Foster slipped and nearly fell just as he fired at the power line the next time and his shot missed. That left him only one remaining cartridge. Aiming with infinite care he sent his last shot smashing squarely into the part of the cable remaining intact.

It trembled and sagged as the bullet cut the remaining metal nearly through. Only a bare thread was left, yet that thread held. Sick at heart over the narrow margin by which his effort had failed, Foster stared in despair at the nearly severed cable. It needed only one solid blow to tear that last thread of metal apart, but the cable was just far enough away to be effectively beyond his reach.

Then suddenly Foster's eyes narrowed. There was a way remaining by which the weakened power line could be broken. A single hurtling dive out and downward from the girder would send his own body crashing squarely into the metal strand. Beneath the smashing impact of his one hundred and eighty pounds the nearly severed cable was certain to break.

Foster shuddered as he realized what that dive into space would mean. He was not thinking of the fall itself. The thirty-foot drop to the diamond-hard floor of the cavern would in all probability mean death or broken bones, but that was a hazard which Foster was willing to take.

It was the thought of what would happen in the brief moment of contact when his body met that bare cable that drained the color from Foster's face. There was the terrific electrical energy from a spinning world coursing through that silver strand, a force that in all probability was powerful enough to instantly char a human body to a glowing cinder!

If he could only insulate his body at the point where it would touch the cable he might have at least a chance of surviving the contact. The only possible insulating medium he had was the clothing he wore—a pair of heavy corduroy trousers

and the sleeveless remnant of a woolen shirt. They could be rolled into a bundle that would be bulky enough to at least give him some protection from contact with the bare cable.

Laying the empty pistol on the girder beside him, he stripped as quickly as his precarious perch would permit. Then, using the pistol as a central core to give body to the bundle, he swathed it deep within the folds of the clothing, making a thick roll that he could hold in his right hand as he leaped.

At best the insulating qualities of the roll would be far from perfect, yet it might serve to minimize the effects of the cable's charge enough to give him some chance of escaping alive. His contact with the power line would be only for the fractional part of a second and his body would be completely in the air at the time, out of direct contact with anything through which the cable's charge might ground.

Foster crouched on the girder, his eyes fixed upon the scene below as he tensely waited for the best moment to make the leap. The machine had shifted its position slightly while he had been stripping. It was now too far over the right to be under the cable when it fell.

For a moment as the machine maneuvered still farther over to the right in its conflict with the cornered men, Foster was afraid that his opportunity had passed. An idea came to him and he yelled directions. One of the men suddenly dashed to the left, apparently in a last frantic effort to escape the metal colossus. The machine flashed quickly over to head the fugitive off. The maneuver brought it for the moment directly under Foster's position.

Foster's muscles tensed swiftly, then flung his body headlong out into space. His aim was perfect. The bulky roll of cloth in his outstretched right hand struck the cable squarely with all the force of his hurtling body behind it.

There was a searing flash of blue flame as the last thread of the cable snapped, and a tearing flood of agony that blotted all consciousness from Foster's brain as his falling body hurtled on toward the cavern floor.

He struggled slowly back to consciousness to find Garrigan and another of the men working over him. There was the stabbing pain of broken bones in his left ankle. With the men helping him, he sat up and looked around.

The scene was one of utter chaos and destruction. The falling cable had obviously found its mark on Layroh's machine-body and in its last furious convulsions the metal colossus had completely wrecked the great glass case in the center of the cavern floor.

The machine itself was now nothing more than a tangled heap of twisted metal. In its shattered crystal compartment was a torn blob of swiftly blackening gelatin—all that remained of Layroh, the Shining One. Other shredded figures of dead flesh marked where the ten half-awakened slugs had died in the wreckage of the glass-walled case.

And in the many tiers of small cells along the cavern's back wall were more figures of death. The severed cable had been the source of the energy that had kept those dormant figures alive. When that energy ceased death had come quickly. Those figures in the cells were no longer Shining Ones. Their bodies were already swiftly darkening in decay.

Foster smiled grimly as he looked around the cavern. There were scientific treasures here that would revolutionize a world. It was a fitting retribution for the Shining Ones. When they had destroyed Atlantis they had robbed Earth of countless centuries of scientific knowledge and progress. Now, here in the cavern that had at last become their tomb, they were leaving a legacy of science that would go far toward repaying that ancient debt.

CEREBRUM

For thousands of years the big brain served as a master switchboard for the thoughts and emotions of humanity. Now the central mind was showing signs of decay ... and men went mad.

The trouble began in a seemingly trivial way. Connor had wanted to speak to Rhoda, his wife, wished himself onto a trunk line and then waited. "Dallas Shipping here, Mars and points Jupiterward, at your service," said a business-is-business, unwifely voice in his mind.

"I was not calling you," he thought back into the line, now also getting a picture, first flat, then properly 3-D and in color. It was a paraNormally luxurious commercial office.

"I am the receptionist at Dallas Shipping," the woman thought back firmly. "You rang and I answered."

"I'm sure I rang right," Connor insisted.

"And I'm sure I know my job," Dallas Shipping answered. "I have received as many as five hundred thought messages a day, some of them highly detailed and technical and—"

"Forget it," snapped Connor. "Let's say I focussed wrong."

He pulled back and twenty seconds later finally had Rhoda on the line. "Queerest thing happened," he projected. "I just got a wrong party."

"Nothing queer about it," his wife smiled, springing to warm life on his inner eye. "You just weren't concentrating, Connor."

"Don't you hand me that too," he grumbled. "I *know* I thought on the right line into Central. Haven't I been using the System for sixty years?"

"Exactly—all habit and no attention."

How smugly soothing she was some days! "I think the trouble's in Central itself. The Switcher isn't receiving me clearly."

"Lately I've had some peculiar miscalls myself," Rhoda said nervously. "But you *can't* blame Central Switching!"

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" By now he was equally nervous and only too happy

to end the conversation. Ordinarily communications were not monitored but if this one had been there could certainly be a slander complaint.

On his way home in the monorail Connor tried to reach his office and had the frightening experience of having his telepathic call refused by Central. Then he refused in turn to accept a call being projected at him, but when an Urgent classification was added he had to take it. "For your unfounded slander of Central Switching's functioning," announced the mechanically-synthesized voice, "you are hereby Suspended indefinitely from the telepathic net. From this point on all paraNormal privileges are withdrawn and you will be able to communicate with your fellows only in person or by written message."

Stunned, Connor looked about at his fellow passengers. Most of them had their eyes closed and their faces showed the mild little smile which was the outer hallmark of a mind at rest, tuned in to a music channel or some other of the hundreds of entertainment lines available from Central. How much he had taken that for granted just a few minutes ago!

Three men, more shabbily dressed, were unsmilingly reading books. They were fellow pariahs, Suspended for one reason or another from paraNormal privileges. Only the dullest, lowest-paying jobs were available to them while anyone inside the System could have Central read any book and transmit the information directly into his cortex. The shabbiest one of all looked up and his sympathetic glance showed that he had instantly grasped Connor's changed situation.

Connor looked hastily away; he didn't want any sympathy from that kind of 'human' being! Then he shuddered. Wasn't he, himself, now that kind in every way except his ability to admit it?

When he stepped onto the lushly hydroponic platform at the suburban stop the paraNormals, ordinarily friendly, showed that they, too, already realized what had happened. Each pair of suddenly icy eyes went past him as if he were not there at all.

He walked up the turf-covered lane toward his house, feeling hopelessly defeated. How would he manage to maintain a home here in the middle of green and luxuriant beauty? More people than ever were now outside the System for one reason or another and most of these unfortunates were crowded in metropolitan centers which were slumhells to anyone who had known something better.

How could he have been so thoughtless because of a little lapse in Central's mechanism? Now that it was denied him, probably forever, he saw more clearly the essential perfection of the system that had brought order into the chaos following the discovery of universal paraNormal capacities. At first there had been endless interference between minds trying to reach each other while fighting off unwanted calls. Men had even suggested this blessing turned curse be annulled.

The Central Synaptic Computation Receptor and Transmitter System had

ended all such negative thinking. For the past century and a half it had neatly routed telepathic transmissions with an efficiency that made ancient telephone exchanges look like Stone Age toys. A mind could instantly exchange information with any other Subscribing mind and still shut itself off through the Central machine if and when it needed privacy. Except, he shuddered once more, if Central put that Urgent rating on a call. Now only Rhoda could get a job to keep them from the inner slumlands.

He turned into his garden and watched Max, the robot, spading in the petunia bed. The chrysanthemums really needed more attention and he was going to think the order to Max when he realized with a new shock that all orders would have to be oral now. He gave up the idea of saying anything and stomped gloomily into the house.

As he hung his jacket in the hall closet he heard Rhoda coming downstairs. "Queer thing happened today," he said with forced cheerfulness, "but we'll manage." He stopped as Rhoda appeared. Her eyes were red and puffed.

"I tried to reach you," she sobbed.

"Oh, you already know. Well, we can manage, you know, honey. You can work two days a week and—"

"You don't understand," she screamed at him. "*I'm* Suspended too! I tried to tell it I hadn't done anything but it said I was guilty by being associated with you."

Stunned, he fell back into a chair. "Not you, too, darling!" He had been getting used to the idea of his own reduced status but this was too brutal. "Tell Central you'll leave me and the guilt will be gone."

"You fool, I did say that and my defense was refused!"

Tears welled in his eyes. Was there no bottom to this horror? "You yourself suggested that?"

"Why shouldn't I?" she cried. "It wasn't my fault at all."

He sat there and tried not to listen as waves of hate rolled over him. Then the front bell rang and Rhoda answered it.

"I haven't been able to reach you," someone was saying through the door. It was Sheila Williams who lived just down the lane. "Lately lines seem to get tied up more and more. It's about tonight's game."

Just then Rhoda opened the door and Sheila came to an abrupt halt as she saw her old friend's face. Her expression turned stony and she said, "I wanted you to know the game is off." Then she strode away.

Unbelieving, Rhoda watched her go. "After forty years!" she exclaimed. She slowly came back to her husband and stared down at him. "Forty years of 'undying' friendship, gone like that!" Her eyes softened a little. "Maybe I'm wrong,

Connor, maybe I said too much through Central myself. And maybe I'd have acted like Sheila if *they* had been the ones."

He withdrew his hands from his face. "I've done the same thing to other wretches myself. We'll just have to get used to it somehow. I've enough social credits to hang on here a year anyway."

"Get used to it," she repeated dully. This time there was no denunciation but she had to flee up the stairs to be alone.

He went to the big bay window and, trying to keep his mind blank, watched Max re-spading the petunia bed. He really should go out and tell the robot to stop, he decided, otherwise the same work would be repeated again and again. But he just watched for the next hour as Max kept returning to the far end of the bed and working his way up to the window, nodding mindlessly with each neat twist of his spade attachment.

Rhoda came back downstairs and said, "It's six-thirty. The first time since the boys left that they didn't call us at six." He thought of Ted on Mars and Phil on Venus and sighed. "By now," she went on, "they know what's happened. Usually colonial children just refuse to have anything more to do with parents like us. And they're right—they have their own futures to consider."

"They'll still write to us," he started reassuring her but she had already gone outside where he could hear her giving Max vocal instructions for preparing dinner. Which was just as well—she would know the truth soon enough. Without a doubt the boys were now also guilty by association and they'd have nothing left to lose by maintaining contact.

At dinner, though, he felt less kindly toward her and snapped a few times. Then it was Rhoda's turn to exercise forebearance and to try to smooth things over. Once she looked out the picture window at the perfect synthetic thatch of the Williams' great cottage, peeping over the hollyhock-topped rise of ground at the end of the garden. "Well?" he demanded. "Well?"

"Nothing, Connor."

"You sighed and I want to know what the devil—"

"Since you insist—I was thinking how lucky Sheila Williams always is. Ten years ago the government authorized twins for her while I haven't had a child in thirty years, and now our disaster forewarns her. She'll never get caught off guard on a paraNormal line."

He snapped his fingers and Max brought out the pudding in a softly shining silver bowl. Above it hovered a bluish halo of flaming brandy. "Maybe not. I've heard of people even being Suspended without a reason." He slowly savored the first spoonful as if it might be the last ever. From now on every privileged pleasure would have that special value. "One more year of such delights."

"If we can stand the ostracism."

"We can." Suddenly he was all angry determination. "I did the wrong thing today, admitted, but it really was the truth, what I said. I've concentrated right and still got wrong numbers!"

"Me too, but I kept thinking it was my own fault."

"The real truth's that while the System assumes more authority each decade it keeps getting less efficient."

"Well, why doesn't the government do something, get everything back in working order?"

His grin showed no pleasure. "Do you know anybody who could help repair a Master Central Computer?"

"Not personally but there must be—"

"Must be nothing! People are slack from having it so good, don't think as much as they used to. Why bother when you can tap Central for any information? *Almost* any information."

"How can it all end?"

"Who knows and who cares?" He was angry all over again. "It will still be working well enough for a few centuries and we, we're just left out in the cold! I'm only ninety, I can live another sixty years, and you, you're going to have a good seventy-five more of this deprivation."

Max was standing at the foot of the table, metal visual lids closed as he waited for instructions. Rhoda considered him unthinkingly, then snapped back to attention. "Nothing more, Max, go to the kitchen and disconnect until you hear from us."

"Yes," he said in that programmed tone which indicated endless gratitude for the privilege of half-being.

"That ends my sad day," Connor sighed. "I'm taking a blackout pill and intend to stay that way for the next fourteen hours."

The next morning he rode into the city in the same car as the one that had brought him back the day before. None of the regulars even deigned to look in his direction. There was another change today. Only two fellow Suspendeds were reading their books even though there had been three for the past few months. Which meant another one had exhausted his income and was being forced into the inner city.

At the office none of Connor's associates greeted him. They didn't even have to contrast the new tension in his face with the easy-going, flannelled contentment of their fellows. Undoubtedly somebody had tried to reach him or Rhoda and heard the Suspension Notice on their severed thought-lines.

As was also to be expected, there was a notice on his desk that his executive services would no longer be needed.

He quickly gathered up his personal things and went downstairs, passing through the office workers pool. Miss Wilson, his Suspended secretary, came up to him. She looked saddened yet, curiously, almost triumphant too. "We all heard the bad news this morning," she said, her blue eyes never wavering. "We want you to know how sorry we are since you're not accustomed—"

"I'll never be accustomed to it," he said bitterly.

"No, Mr. Newman, you mustn't think that way. Human beings can get accustomed to whatever's necessary."

"Necessary? Not in my books!"

"Some day you may feel differently. I was born into a Suspended family and we've managed. Being on the outside has its compensations."

"Such as?"

"We-l-l—," she faltered, "I really don't know exactly. But you must have faith it will be so." She pulled out a card from a pocket of her sheath dress. "Maybe you'll want to use this some day."

He glanced at the card which said, *John Newbridge, Doctor at Mind, 96th Level, Harker Building, Appointments by Writing Only*. There was no thought-line coding.

"I have no doubt," he muttered. But she was starting to look hurt so he carefully slid the card into his wallet.

"He's very helpful," she said. "I mean, helpful for people who have adjustment problems."

"You're a good girl," he said huskily. "Maybe we'll meet someday again. I'll have my wife call—write to you so you can visit us before we have to come into the city."

"That," she smiled happily, "would be so wonderful, Mr. Newman. I've never been in a home like that." Then, choking with emotion, she turned and hurried away.

When he reached home and told Rhoda what had happened, his wife was not in the least bit moved. "I'll never let that girl in my house," she said through thin lips. "A classless nothing! I'm going to keep my pride while I can."

There was some sense to her viewpoint but, he felt uncertainly, not enough for him to remain silent. "We have to adjust, darling, can't go on thinking we're what we're not."

"Why can't we?" she exploded. "I couldn't even order food today. Max had to go to the AutoMart and pick it up!"

"What are you trying to say?"

"That *you* made this mess!"

For a while he listened, dully unresponsive, but eventually the vituperation

became too bitter and he came back at her with equal vigor. Until, weeping, she rushed upstairs once more.

That was the first of many arguments. Anything could bring them on, instructions for Max that she chose to consider erroneous, a biting statement from him that she was deliberately making herself physically unattractive. More and more Rhoda took to going into the city while he killed time making crude, tentative adjustments on Max. What the devil, he occasionally wondered, could she be doing there?

But most of the time he did not bother about it; he had found a consolation of his own. At first it had been impossible to make the slightest changes in Max, even those that permitted the robot to remain conscious and give advice. Again and again his mind strained toward Central until the icy-edged truth cut into his brain—there was no line.

Out of boredom, though, he plugged away, walked past the disdainfully-staring eyes of neighbors to the village library, and withdrew dusty microfiles on robotry. Eventually he had acquired a little skill at contemplating what, essentially, remained a mystery to his easily-tired mind. It was not completely satisfactory but it would be enough to get him a better-than-average menial job when he had finally accepted his new condition.

At long last a letter came from Ted on Mars. It said:

Guilty by association, that's what I am! When it first happened I was furious with the two of you but resignation has its own consolations and I've given up the ranting. Of course, I've lost my job and my new one will keep me from Earth a longer time but the real loss is not being able to think on Earth Central once a day. As you know, it's a funny civilization here anyway. As yet, there's no local telepathic Central but all Active Communicators are permitted to think in on Earth Central once a day—except for the big shots who can even telepath social engagements to each other by way of Earth! Privileged but a pretty dull crowd anyway.

Oh yes, another exception to the general ration, Suspendeds like me. Funny thing about that, seems to me there are more Suspended from the Earth System all the time. Maybe I'm imagining it.

As lovingly as ever, your son, Ted. (NO. *More* than ever!)

Rhoda really went to pieces for a while after that letter but, oddly enough, all recriminations soon stopped. She began going into the city every day and after each visit seemed a little calmer for having done so.

Finally Connor could no longer remain silent about it. But by now all conversations had to be broached by tactful beating around the bush so he began by saying he had decided to take a lower level job in the metropolis.

Rhoda was not surprised. "I know. A good idea but I think you should wait a

while longer and do something else first."

That made him suspicious. "Are you developing a new kind of unblockable ESP? How'd you know?"

"No," she laughed. "Some day we will maybe and people will use it better this time. But right now I'm just going by what I see. You've been studying Max and I knew you were bound to get restless." She became thoughtful. "What you really want to know, though, is what I've been doing in the city. Well, at first I did very little. I kept ending up in theatres where we Suspendeds can go. That gave a little relief. But since Ted's letter it's been different. I finally got up the courage to see Dr. Newbridge."

"Newbridge!"

"Connor, he's a great man. You should see him too."

"My mind may have smaller scope outside the System but what's left of it isn't cracking, Rhoda." Working himself into a spasm of righteous rage, he stalked out into the garden and tried to convince himself he was calmly studying the rose bushes' growth. But Sheila and Tony Williams came down the lane that skirted the garden and, as their eyes moved haughtily past him, his rage shifted its focus. He came back into the house and remained in sullen silence.

Rhoda went on as if there had been no interruption. "I still say Dr. Newbridge is a great man. He dropped out of the System of his own free will and that certainly took courage!"

"He willingly gave up his advantages and privileges?"

"Yes. And he's explained why to me. He felt it was destroying every Subscriber's ability to think and that it could not last. Some day we would be without anything to do our thinking and he wanted out."

Connor sat down and stared thoughtfully out the window. Max had just lumbered into the garden and, having unscrewed one hand to replace it with a flexible spade, was starting on the evening schedule for turning over the soil at the base of the plants. He would go methodically down one flower bed, then up the next one, until all had been worked over, then would start all over again unless ordered to stop. "Are we to end up the same way?" Connor shuddered. He slapped his knee. "All right, I'll go with you tomorrow. I've got to see what he's like—a man who'd voluntarily surrender ninety percent of his powers!"

The next morning they rode into the city together and went to the Harker Building. It was in an area dense with non-telepaths each one showing that telltale cleft of anxiety in his forehead but briskly going about his business as if anxiety were actually a liveable quality. Newbridge had the same look but there was a nonetheless reassuring ease to the way he greeted them. He was tall and white-haired and his face frequently assumed an abstracted look as if his mind were reaching far away.

"You've come here," he said, "for two reasons. The first is dissatisfaction with your life. More precisely, you're dissatisfied with your attitude toward life but you wouldn't be willing to put it that way, not yet. Secondly, you want to know why anyone would willingly leave the System."

Connor leaned back in his chair. "That'll do for a starter."

"Right. Well, there aren't many anomalies like me but we do exist. Most people outside the System are there because they've been Suspended for supposed infractions, or they've been put out through guilt by association, or because they were born into a family already in that condition. Nothing like that happened to me. From early childhood I was trained by parents and teachers to discipline the projective potential of my mind into the System. Like every other paraNormal, I received my education by tapping Central for contact with information centers and other minds. But I was a fluke." His dark blue eyes twinkled. "Biological units are never so standardized that *all* of them fall under any system that can be devised. I functioned in this System, true, but I could imagine my mind existing outside, could see my functioning *from the outside*. This is terribly rare—most people are limited to the functions which sustain them. They experience nothing else except when circumstances force them to. I, though, could see the System was not all-powerful."

"Not all-powerful!" Connor exploded. "It got rid of me awfully easily."

His wife tried to calm him. "Listen, dear, then decide."

"You're surviving as a pariah, Mr. Newman, aren't you? Your wife tells me you've even started to study robot controls, valuable knowledge for the future and personally satisfying now. Millions of people do survive as outsiders, as do the planetary colonists who only have limited access so far to social telepathy. The System has built into it defenses against Subscribers who lack confidence in it—if it didn't it would collapse. But people *in* the System are not forced to remain there. They can *will* themselves out any time they close their minds to it, as I did. But they don't want to will themselves out of it—you certainly didn't—and their comfortable inertia keeps everything going. I think you have to know a little about its history, a history which never would have interested you if you were still comfortably inside it."

He slowly outlined the way it had developed. First those uncertain steps toward understanding the universally latent powers of telepathy, then growing chaos as each individual spent most of his time fighting off unwanted messages. After a period of desperate discomfort a few great minds, made superhuman by their ability to tap each others' resources, had devised the Central System Switchboard. Only living units, delicately poised between rigid order and sheer chaos, could receive mental messages but this problem had been solved by the molecular biologists with their synthesized, self-replicating axons, vastly elongated and

cunningly intertwined by the billions. These responded to every properly-modulated thought wave passing through them and made the same careful sortings as a human cell absorbing matter from the world. Then, to make certain this central mind would never become chaotic, there was programmed into it an automatic rejection of all sceptical challenges.

"That was the highest moment of our race," Newbridge sighed. "We had harnessed infinite complexities to our needs. But the success was too complete. Ever since then humanity has become more and more dependent on what was to be essentially a tool and nothing more. Each generation became lazier and there's no one alive who can keep this Central System in proper working order." He leaned forward to emphasize his point. "You see, it's very slowly breaking down. There's a steady accretion of inefficiency mutations in the axons and that's why more and more switching mistakes are being made—as in your case."

Connor was dazed by it all. "What's going to be the upshot, I mean, *how* is it going to break down?"

Newbridge threw up his hands. "I don't know—it's probably a long way off anyway. I guess the most likely thing is that more and more errors will accumulate and plenty of people will be Suspended just because Central is developing irrational quirks. Maybe the critical social mass for change will exist only when more are outside the System than inside. I suspect when that happens we'll be able to return to *direct* telepathic contact. As things are, our projection attempts are always blocked." A buzzing sound came out of a small black box on the doctor's desk, startling Connor who in his executive days had received all such signals directly in his head. "Well, I've another patient waiting so this will have to be the end of our chat."

Connor and his wife exchanged glances. He said, "I'd like to come back. I'll probably have a twenty-hour week so I'll be in town a few days a week."

"More than welcome to come again," Newbridge grinned. "Just make the arrangements with Miss Richards, my nurse."

When they were in the street Rhoda asked, "Well, what do you think now?"

"I don't know what to think yet—but I do feel better. Rhoda, would you mind going home alone? I think I'll find a job right away."

"Mind?" she laughed. "It's wonderful news!"

After he left her he wandered around the city awhile. In his paraNormal days he had never noticed them but it certainly was true that there were a lot of Suspendeds about. He studied some of them as he went along, trying to fathom their likes and dislikes by the way they moved and their expressions. But, unlike the paraNormals, each was different and it was impossible to see deeply into them.

Then, as he rounded a corner, he was suddenly face to face with his new enemy. A large flat park stood before him and there in the middle was a hundred-

story tower of smooth seamless material, the home of the Central System's brain. There were smaller towers at many points in the world but this was the most important, capable of receiving on its mile-long axons, antennas of the very soul itself, every thought projected at it from any point in the solar system. The housing gleamed blindingly in the sun of high noon, as perfect as the day it had been completed. That surface was designed to repel all but the most unusual of the radiation barrages that could bring on subtle changes in the brain within. The breakdown, he thought bitterly, would take too many centuries to consider.

He turned away and headed into an Employment Exchange. The man behind the desk there was a Suspended, too, and showed himself to be sympathetically understanding as soon as he studied the application form. "ParaNormal until a few months ago," he nodded. "Tough change to make, I guess."

Connor managed a little grin. "Maybe I'll be grateful it happened some day."

"A curious thought, to say the least." He glanced down the application again. "Always some kind of work available although there do seem to be more Suspendeds all the time. Robot repair—that's good! Always a shortage there."

So Connor went to work in a large building downtown along with several hundred other men whose principal duty was overseeing the repair of robot servitors by other servitors and rectifying any minor errors that persisted. He was pleased to find that, while some of his fellow workmen knew much more about the work than he did, there were as many who knew less. But the most pleasing thing of all was the way they cooperated with one another. They could not reach directly into each other's minds but the very denial of this power gave them a sense of common need.

He visited Newbridge once a week and that, too, proved increasingly helpful. As time went on, he found he was spending less of it regretting what he had lost. But once in a while a paraNormal came through the workshop, eyes moving past the Suspendeds as if they did not exist and the old resentment would return in all its bitterness. And when he himself did not feel this way he could still sense it in men around him.

"Perfectly natural way to feel," Rhoda said, "not that it serves any purpose."

"It's paraNormal lack of reaction," he tried to explain, "that's what really bothers me. They don't even bother to notice our hatred because we have the strength of insects next to theirs. They can all draw on each others' resources and that totals to infinitely more than any of us have, even if as individuals they're so much less. The perfect form of security."

But for a moment one day that security seemed to be collapsing. Above the work floor in Connor's factory there was a gallery of small but luxurious offices in which the executive staff of paraNormals 'worked.' None of them came in more

than two days a week but use of these offices was rotated among them so all were ordinarily occupied and workers, going upstairs to the stock depot, could see paraNormals in various stages of relaxation. Usually the paraNormal kept his feet on a desk rest and, eyes closed, contemplated incoming entertainment. On rarer occasions he would be leaning over a document on the desk as his mind received the proper decision from Central.

This particular morning Connor was feeling bitterly envious as he went by the offices. He had already seen seven smugly-similar faces when he came by Room Eight. Suddenly the face of its occupant contorted in agony, then the man got up and paced about as if in a trap. Deciding he had seen more than was good for him, Connor hurried on. But the man in Nine was acting out the same curious drama. He quickly retraced his steps, passing one scene of consternation after another, and went back down to the work floor, wondering what it all meant.

Soon everybody knew something extraordinary was afoot as all the paraNormals swarmed noisily onto the runway overlooking the floor. They were shouting wordless sounds at each other, floundering about as they did so. Then, with equal suddenness, everything was calm again and, faces more relaxed, they went back into their offices.

That evening Connor heard the same story everywhere—for ten minutes all paraNormals had gone berserk. On the monorail he noticed that, though still more relaxed than their unwelcome fellows, they no longer exuded that grating *absolute* sense of security. No doubt about it—for a few minutes something had gone wrong, completely wrong, with the Central System. "I don't like it," Rhoda said. "Let's see Dr. Newbridge tomorrow."

"I'll bet it's a good sign."

Newbridge, though, was also worried when they got to see him. "They're losing some of their self-confidence," he said, "and that means they're going to start noticing us. Figure it out, Newman, about one-third the population of Earth—nobody can get exact figures—is outside the System. The paraNormals will want to reduce our numbers if more breakdowns take place. I'll have to go into hiding soon."

"But why you of all people?" Connor protested.

"Because I and a few thousand others like me represent not only an alternative way of life—all Suspendeds do that—but we possess more intensive knowledge for rehabilitating society after Central's collapse. That collapse may come much sooner than we've been expecting. When it does we're going to have enormous hordes of paras milling around, helplessly waiting to learn how to think for themselves again. Well, when we finally reach the telepath stage next time we'll have to manage it better." He took out an envelope. "If anything happens to me, this contains the names of some people you're to contact."

"Why don't you come to our place now?" asked Rhoda. "We'll still be able to hold it for a few more months."

"Can't go yet, too many things to clear up. But maybe later." He rose and extended his hand to them. "Anyway it's a kind—and brave—offer."

"Sounds overly melodramatic to me," Connor said when they were outside. "Who'd want to harm a psychiatric worker with no knowledge except what's in his head and his personal library?"

But he stopped harping on the point when they reached the monorail station. Three Suspendeds, obviously better educated than most, were being led away by a large group of paraNormals. The paraNormals had their smug expressions back but there was a strange gleam of determination in their eyes. "Sometimes life itself gets overly melodramatic," Rhoda said nervously.

The possible fate of these arrested men haunted him all the way home as did the hostile stares of the people in the monorail car. At home, though, there was the momentary consolation of a pair of letters from the boys. There was little information in them but they did at least convey in every line love for their parents.

But even this consolation did not last long. Why, Connor muttered to himself, did they have to wait for letters when telephone and radio systems could have eased their loneliness so much more effectively? Because the paras did not need such systems and their needs were the only ones that mattered! His fingers itched to achieve something more substantial than the work, now childishly routine, that he was doing at the factory. Just from studying Max he knew he could devise such workable communication systems. But all that was idle daydreaming—it wouldn't be in his lifetime.

The next morning Rhoda insisted they go back into the city to try once more to persuade Newbridge to leave. When they arrived at the Harker Building it seemed strangely quiet. The few people who were about kept avoiding each others' glances and they found themselves alone in the elevator to the 96th level. But Miss Richards, the doctor's nurse-secretary, was standing in the corridor as they got out. She was trembling and found it difficult to talk. "Don't—don't go in," she stuttered. "No help now."

He pushed past her, took one glance at the fire-charred consulting room where a few blackened splinters of bone remained and turned away, leading the two women to the elevator. At first Miss Richards did not want to go but he forced her to come along. "You have to get away from here—can't do any good for him now."

She sucked in air desperately, blinked back her tears and nodded. "There was another ten-minute breakdown this morning. A lot of paraNormals panicked and a vigilante pack came here to fire-blast the Doctor. They said I'd be next if

things got any worse."

Connor pinched his forehead to hold back his own anguish, then pulled out a sheet of paper. "Dr. Newbridge was afraid of something like this. He gave me a list of names."

"I know, Mr. Newman, I know them by heart."

"Shouldn't we try to contact one of them?"

As they came out into the street, she stopped and thought a moment. "Crane would be the easiest to reach. He's an untitled psychiatrist and one of the alternate leaders for the underground."

"Underground?"

"Oh, they tried to be prepared for every eventual—"

"It's impossible!" Rhoda broke in. She had been looking up and down the great avenue as they talked. "There isn't one person in the street, not one!"

An abandoned robot cab stood at the curb and he threw open the door. "Come on, get in! Something's happening. Miss Richards, set it for this Crane's address."

The cab started to shoot uptown, turning a corner into another deserted boulevard. As it skirted the great Park, he pointed at Central Tower. There seemed to be a slight crack in the smooth surface half way up but, as a moment's mist engulfed the tower, it looked flawless again. Then all the mist was gone and the crack was back, a little larger than before.

Connor leaned forward and set the cab for top speed as they rounded into the straight-away of another uptown street. Occasionally they caught glimpses of frightened faces, clumped in lobby entrances, and once two bodies came flying out of a window far ahead. "They're killing our people everywhere," moaned the nurse.

As they approached the crushed forms, Connor slowed down a little. "They're dressed too well—what's left of them. They're paraNormals!"

A minute later they were at the large apartment block where Crane lived. They entered the building through a lobby jammed with more silent people. All were Suspendeds.

At first Crane did not want to let the trio in but when he recognized Newbridge's nurse he unlocked the heavily-bolted door. He was a massively-built man with dark eyes set deeply beneath a jutting brow and the eyes did not blink as Miss Richards told him what had happened. "We'll miss him," he said, then turned abruptly on Connor. "Have you any skills?"

"Robotics," he answered.

The great head nodded as Connor told of his experience at work and on Max. "Good, we're going to need people like you for rebuilding." He pulled a

radio sender and receiver from a cabinet and held an earphone close to his temple, continuing to nod. Then he put it down again. "I know what you're going to say—illegal, won't work and all that. Well, a few of us have been waiting for the chance to build our own communication web and now we can do it."

"I just want to know why you keep mentioning *our* rebuilding. They're more likely to destroy all of us in their present mood."

"*Us?*" He took them to the window and pointed toward the harbor where thousands of black specks were tumbling into the water. "They're destroying themselves! Some jumping from buildings but most pouring toward the sea, a kind of oceanic urge to escape completely from themselves, to bury themselves in something infinitely bigger than their separate hollow beings. Before they were more like contented robots. Now they're more like suicidal lemmings because they can't exist without this common brain to which they've given so little and from which they've taken so much."

Connor squared his shoulders. "We'll have our work cut out for us. Dr. Newbridge saw it all coming, you did too."

"Not quite," Crane sighed. "We assumed that at the time of complete breakdown the System would open up, throwing all the Subscribers out of it, leaving them disconnected from each other and waiting for our help. But it worked out in just the opposite manner!"

"You mean that the System is staying closed as it breaks down? Like a telephone exchange in which all the lines remained connected and every call went to all telephones."

"Exactly," Crane replied.

"I don't understand this technical talk," Rhoda protested, watching in hypnotized horror as the speck swarm swelled ever larger in the sea.

"I'll put it this way," Crane explained. "Their only hope was to have time to develop the desire for release from the System as it died. But they are dying *inside* it. You see, Mrs. Newman, every thought in every paraNormal's head, every notion, every image, no matter how stupidly trivial, is now pouring into every other paraNormal's head. They're over-communicating to the point where there's nothing left to communicate but death itself!"

CITADEL

The aging man was sweating profusely, and he darted sidelong glances at the windowless walls of the outer office. By turns, he sat stiffly in a corner chair or paced uneasily, his head swiveling constantly.

His hand was clammy when Mead shook it.

"Hello, Mr. Mead," he said in a husky, hesitant voice, his eyes never quite still, never long on Mead's face, but darting hither and yon, his glance rebounding at every turn from the walls, the floor, the ceiling, the closed outer door.

Christopher Mead, Assistant Undersecretary for External Affairs, returned the handshake, smiling. "Please come into my office," he said quickly. "It's much more spacious."

"Thank you," the aging man said gratefully and hurried into the next room. Mead rapidly opened the windows, and some of the man's nervousness left him. He sank down into the visitor's chair in front of Mead's desk, his eyes drinking in the distances beyond the windows. "Thank you," he repeated.

Mead sat down behind the desk, leaned back, and waited for the man's breathing to slow. Finally he said, "It's good to see you again, Mr. Holliday. What can I do for you?"

Martin Holliday tore his glance away from the window long enough to raise his eyes to Mead's face and then drop them to the hands he had folded too deliberately in his lap.

"I'd—" His voice husked into unintelligibility, and he had to begin again. "I'd like to take an option on a new planet," he finally said.

Mead nodded. "I don't see why not." He gestured expressively at the star chart papered over one wall of his office. "We've certainly got plenty of them. But what happened with your first one?"

"It d-d-duh—"

"Mr. Holliday, I certainly won't be offended if you'd prefer to look out the window," Mead said quickly.

"Thank you." After a moment, he began again. "It didn't work out," he said,

his glance flickering back to Mead for an instant before he had to look out the window again.

"I don't know where my figuring went wrong. It go wrong. It was just ... just . I thought I could sell enough subdivisions to cover the payments and still keep most of it for myself, but it didn't work out."

He looked quickly at Mead with a flash of groundless guilt in his eyes. "First I had to sell more than I'd intended, because I had to lower the original price. Somebody'd optioned another planet in the same system, and I hadn't counted on the competition. Then, even after I'd covered the option and posted surety on the payments, there were all kinds of expenses. Then I couldn't lease the mineral rights—" He looked at Mead again, as though he had to justify himself. "I don't know how that deal fell through. The company just ... just , all of a sudden."

"Do you think there might have been anything peculiar about that?" Mead asked. "I mean—could the company have made a deal with the colonists for a lower price after you'd been forced out?"

Holliday shook his head quickly. "Oh, no—nothing like that. The colonists and I got along fine. It wasn't as though I hadn't put the best land up for sale, or tried to make myself rich. Why, after I'd had to sell some of the remaining land, and I knew it wasn't worth staying, any more, some of them offered to lend me enough money to keep fifty thousand square miles for myself." He smiled warmly, his eyes blank while he focused on memory.

"But that wasn't it, of course," he went on. "I had my original investment back. But I couldn't tell them why I couldn't stay. It was —even if I never saw them, it was the thought of people, with aircraft and rockets and roads—"

"I understand, Mr. Holliday," Mead said in an effort to spare him embarrassment.

Holliday looked at him helplessly. "I couldn't tell them that, could I, Mr. Mead? They were good, friendly people who wanted to help me. I couldn't tell them it was people, could I?"

He wet his dry lips and locked his eyes on the view outside the window. "All I want, Mr. Mead, is half a planet to myself," he said softly.

He shook his head. "Well, it'll work out this time. This time, I won't have to sell so much, and I'll have a place to spend what time I've got left in peace, without this ... this—" He gestured helplessly in an effort to convey his tortured consciousness of his own fear.

Mead nodded quickly as he saw his features knot convulsively. "Of course, Mr. Holliday. We'll get you an option on a new planet as quickly as we can."

"Thank you," Holliday said again. "Can we ... can we handle it today? I've had my credit transferred to a local bank."

"Certainly, Mr. Holliday. We won't keep you on Earth a moment longer than absolutely necessary." He took a standard form out of a desk drawer and passed it to Holliday for his signature.

"I'll be smarter this time," the aging man said, trying to convince himself, as he uncapped his pen. "This time, it'll work out."

"I'm sure it will, Mr. Holliday," Mead said.

Marlowe was obese. He sat behind his desk like a tuskless sea lion crouched behind a rock, and his cheeks merged into jowls and obliterated his neck. His desk was built specially, so that he could get his thighs under it. His office chair was heavier and wider by far than any standard size, its casters rolling on a special composition base that had been laid down over the carpeting, for Marlowe's weight would have cut any ordinary rug to shreds. His jacket stretched like pliofilm to enclose the bulk of his stooped shoulders, and his eyes surveyed his world behind the battlemented heaviness of the puffing flesh that filled their sockets.

A bulb flickered on his interphone set, and Marlowe shot a glance at the switch beneath it.

"Secretary, quite contrary," he muttered inaudibly. He flicked the switch. "Yes, Mary?" His voice rumbled out of the flabby cavern of his chest.

"Mr. Mead has just filed a report on Martin Holliday, Mr. Secretary. Would you like to see it?"

"Just give me a summary, Mary."

Under his breath he whispered, "Summary that mummery, Mary," and a thin smile fell about his lips while he listened. "Gave him Karlshaven IV, eh?" he observed when his secretary'd finished. "O.K. Thanks, Mary."

He switched off and sat thinking. Somewhere in the bowels of the Body Administrative, he knew, notations were being made and cross-filed. The addition of Karlshaven IV to the list of planets under colonization would be made, and Holliday's asking prices for land would be posted with Emigration, together with a prospectus abstracted from the General Galactic Survey.

He switched the interphone on again.

"Uh ... Mary? Supply me with a copy of the GenSurv on the entire Karlshaven system. Tell Mr. Mead I'll expect him in my office sometime this afternoon—you schedule it—and we'll go into it further."

"Yes, Mr. Secretary. Will fifteen-fifteen be all right?"

"Fifteen-fifteen's fine, uh ... Mary," Marlowe said gently.

"Yes, sir," his secretary replied, abashed. "I keep forgetting about proper nomenclature."

"So do I, Mary, so do I," Marlowe sighed. "Anything come up that wasn't scheduled for today?"

It was a routine question, born of futile hope. There was always something to spoil the carefully planned daily schedules.

"Yes and no, sir."

Marlowe cocked an eyebrow at the interphone.

"Well, that's a slight change, anyway. What is it?"

"There's a political science observer from Dovenil—that's Moore II on our maps, sir—who's requested permission to talk to you. He's here on the usual exchange program, and he's within his privileges in asking, of course. I assume it's the ordinary thing—what's our foreign policy, how do you apply it, can you give specific instances, and the like."

Precisely, Marlowe thought. For ordinary questions there were standard answers, and Mary had been his secretary for so long that she could supply them as well as he could.

Dovenil. Moore II, eh? Obviously, there was something special about the situation, and Mary was leaving the decision to him. He scanned through his memorized star catalogues, trying to find the correlation.

"Mr. Secretary?"

Marlowe grunted. "Still here. Just thinking. Isn't Dovenil that nation we just sent Harrison to?"

"Yes, sir. On the same exchange program."

Marlowe chuckled. "Well, if we've got down there, it's only fair to let their fellow learn something in exchange, isn't it? What's his name?"

"Dalish ud Klavan, sir."

Marlowe muttered to himself: "Dalish ud Klavan, Irish, corn beef and cabbage." His mind filed it away together with a primary-color picture of Jiggs and Maggie.

"All right, Mary, I'll talk to him, if you can find room in the schedule somewhere. Tell you what—let him in at fifteen-thirty. Mead and I can furnish a working example for him. Does that check all right with your book?"

"Yes, sir. There'll be time if we carry over on the Ceroii incidents."

"Ceroii's waited six years, four months, and twenty-three days. They'll wait another day. Let's do that, then, uh ... Mary."

"Yes, sir."

Marlowe switched off and picked up a report which he began to read by the page-block system, his eyes almost unblinking between pages. "Harrison, eh?" he muttered once, stopping to look quizzically at his desktop. He chuckled.

At fifteen-fifteen, the light on his interphone blinked twice, and Marlowe hastily initialed a directive with his right hand while touching the switch with his left.

"Yes, Mary?"

"Mr. Mead, sir."

"O.K." He switched off, pushed the directive into his OUT box, and pulled the GenSurv and the folder on Martin Holliday out of the HOLD tray. "Come in, Chris," he said as Mead knocked on the door.

"How are you today, Mr. Marlowe?" Mead asked as he sat down.

"Four ounces heavier," Marlowe answered dryly. "I presume you're not. Cigarette, Chris?"

Apparently, the use of the first name finally caught Mead's notice. He looked thoughtful for a moment, then took a cigarette and lit it. "Thanks—Dave."

"Well, I'm glad that's settled," Marlowe chuckled, his eyes almost disappearing in crinkles of flesh. "How's Mary?"

Mead grinned crookedly. " is in fine fettle today, thank you."

Marlowe rumbled a laugh. Mead had once made the mistake of addressing the woman as "Mary," under the natural assumption that if Marlowe could do it, everyone could.

"Mary, I fear," Marlowe observed, "lives in more stately times than these. She'll tolerate informality from me because I'm in direct authority over her, and direct authority, of course, is Law. But you, Mead, are a young whipper-snapper."

"But that's totally unrealistic!" Mead protested. "I don't respect her less by using her first name ... it's just ... just friendliness, that's all."

"Look," Marlowe said, "it makes sense, but it ain't logical—not on her terms. Mary Folsom was raised by a big, tough, tight-lipped authoritarian of a father who believed in bringing kids up by the book. By the time she got tumbled out into the world, all big men were unquestionable authority and all young men were callow whipper-snappers. Sure, she's unhappy about it, inside. But it makes her a perfect secretary, for me, and she does her job well. We play by her rules on the little things, and by the world's rules on the big ones. Kapish?"

"Sure, Dave, but—"

Marlowe picked up the folder on Holliday and gave Mead one weighty but understanding look before he opened it.

"Your trouble, Chris, is that your viewpoint is fundamentally sane," he said. "Now, about Holliday, Martin, options 062-26-8729, 063-108-1004. I didn't get time to read the GenSurv on the Karlshaven planets, so I'll ask you to brief me."

"Yes, sir."

"What's IV like?"

"Good, arable land. A little mountainous in spots, but that's good. Loaded with minerals—industrial stuff, like silver. Some tin, but not enough to depress the monetary standard. Lots of copper. Coal beds, petroleum basins, the works. Self-

supporting practically from the start, a real asset to the Union in fifty-six years."

Marlowe nodded. "Good. Nice picking, Chris. Now—got a decoy?"

"Yes, sir. Karlshaven II's a False-E. I've got a dummy option on it in the works, and we'll be able to undercut Holliday's prices for his land by about twenty per cent."

"False-E, huh? How long do you figure until the colony can't stick on it any longer?"

"A fair-sized one, with lots of financial backing, might even make it permanently. But we won't be able to dig up that many loafers, and, naturally, we can't give them that big a subsidy. Eventually, we'll have to ferry them all out—in about eight years, say. But that'll give us time enough to break Holliday."

Marlowe nodded again. "Sounds good."

"Something else," Mead said. "II's mineral-poor. It's near to being solid metal. That's what makes it impossible to really live on, but I figure we can switch the mineral companies right onto it and off IV."

Marlowe grinned approvingly. "You been saving this one for Holliday?"

"Yes, sir," Mead said, nodding slowly. He looked hesitantly at Marlowe.

"What's up, Boy?"

"Well, sir—" Mead began, then stopped. "Nothing important, really."

Marlowe gave him a surprising look full of sadness and brooding understanding.

"You're thinking he's an old, frightened man, and why don't we leave him alone?"

"Why ... yes, sir."

"Dave."

"Yes, Dave."

"You're quite right. Why don't we?"

"We can't, sir. I know that. But it doesn't seem fair—"

"Exactly, Chris. It ain't right, but it's correct."

The light on Marlowe's interphone blinked once. Marlowe looked at it in momentary surprise. Then his features cleared, and he muttered "Cabbage." He reached out toward the switch.

"We've got a visitor, Chris. Follow my lead." He reviewed his information on Dovenilid titular systems while he touched the switch. "Ask ud Klavan to come in, uh ... Mary."

Dalish ud Klavan was almost a twin for the pictured typical Dovenilid in Marlowe's library. Since the pictures were usually idealized, it followed that Klavan was an above-average specimen of his people. He stood a full eight feet from

fetters to crest, and had not yet begun to thicken his shoes in compensation for the stoop that marked advancing middle age for his race.

Marlowe, looking at him, smiled inwardly. No Dovenilid could be so obviously superior and still only a lowly student. Well, considering Harrison's qualifications, it might still not be tit for tat.

Mead began to get to his feet, and Marlowe hastily planted a foot atop his nearest shoe. The assistant winced and twitched his lips, but at least he stayed down.

"Dalish ud Klavan," the Dovenilid pronounced, in good English.

"David Marlowe, Secretary for External Affairs, Solar Union," Marlowe replied.

Ud Klavan looked expectantly at Mead.

"Christopher Mead, Assistant Undersecretary for External Affairs," the assistant said, orientating himself.

"If you would do us the honor of permitting us to stand—" Marlowe asked politely.

"On the contrary, Marlowe. If you would do me the honor of permitting me to sit, I should consider it a privilege."

"Please do so. Mr. Mead, if you would bring our visitor a chair—"

They lost themselves in formalities for a few minutes, Marlowe being urbanely correct, Mead following after as best he could through the maze of Dovenilid morés. Finally they were able to get down to the business at hand, ud Klavan sitting with considerable comfort in the carefully designed chair which could be snapped into almost any shape, Marlowe bulking behind his desk, Mead sitting somewhat nervously beside him.

"Now, as I understand it, ud Klavan," Marlowe began, "you'd like to learn something of our policies and methods."

"That is correct, Marlowe and Mead." The Dovenilid extracted a block of opaque material from the flat wallet at his side and steadied it on his knee. "I have your permission to take notes?"

"Please do. Now, as it happens, Mr. Mead and I are currently considering a case which perfectly illustrates our policies."

Ud Klavan immediately traced a series of ideographs on the note block, and Marlowe wondered if he was actually going to take their conversation down verbatim. He shrugged mentally. He'd have to ask him, at some later date, whether he'd missed anything. Undoubtedly, there'd be a spare recording of the tape he himself was making.

"To begin: As you know, our government is founded upon principles of extreme personal freedom. There are no arbitrary laws governing expression, wor-

ship, the possession of personal weapons, or the rights of personal property. The state is construed to be a mechanism of public service, operated by the Body Politic, and the actual regulation and regimentation of society is accomplished by natural socio-economic laws which, of course, are both universal and unavoidable.

"We pride ourselves on the high status of the individual in comparison to the barely-tolerable existence of the state. We do, naturally, have ordinances and injunctions governing crimes, but even these are usually superseded by civil action at the personal level."

Marlowe leaned forward a trifle. "Forgetting exact principles for a moment, ud Klavan, you realize that the actuality will sometimes stray from the ideal. Our citizens, for example, do not habitually carry weapons except under extraordinary conditions. But that is a civil taboo, rather than a fixed amendation of our constitution. I have no doubt that some future generation, morés having shifted, will, for example, revive the ."

Ud Klavan nodded. "Quite understood, thank you, Marlowe."

"Good. Now, to proceed:

"Under conditions such as those, the state and its agencies lay down a fixed policy of any sort, and expect it to be in the least permanent. The people will not tolerate such regulation, and with each new shift in social morés—and the institution of any policy is itself sufficient to produce such a shift within a short time—successive policies are repudiated by the Body Politic, and new ones must be instituted."

Marlowe leaned back and spread his hands. "Therefore," he said with a rueful smile, "it can fairly be said that we no foreign policy, effectively speaking. We pursue the expedient, ud Klavan, and hope for the best. The case which Mr. Mead and I are currently considering is typical.

"The Union, as you know, maintains a General Survey Corps whose task it is to map the galaxy, surveying such planets as harbor alien races or seem suitable for human colonization. Such a survey team, for example, first established contact between your people and ours. Exchange observation rights are worked out, and representatives of both races are given the opportunity to acquaint themselves with the society of the other.

"In the case of unoccupied, habitable planets, however, the state's function ceases with the filing of a complete and definitive survey at the Under-Ministry for Emigration. The state, as a state, sponsors no colonies and makes no establishments except for the few staging bases which are maintained for the use of the Survey Corps. We have not yet found any need for the institution of an offensive service analogous to a planetary army, nor do we expect to. War in space is possible only under extraordinary conditions, and we foresee no such contingency.

"All our colonization is carried out by private citizens who apply to Mr. Mead, here, for options on suitable unoccupied planets. Mr. Mead's function is to act as a consultant in these cases. He maintains a roster of surveyed human-habitable planets, and either simply assigns the requested planet or recommends one to fit specified conditions. The cost of the option is sufficient to cover the administrative effort involved, together with sufficient profit to the government to finance further surveys.

"The individual holding the option is then referred to Emigration, which provides copies of a prospectus taken from the General Survey report, and advertises the option holder's asking prices on subdivisions. Again, there is a reasonable fee of a nature similar to ours, devoted to the same purposes.

"The state then ceases to have any voice in the projected colonization whatsoever. It is a totally private enterprise—a simple real estate operation, if you will, with the state acting only as an advertising agency, and, occasionally, as the lessor of suitable transportation from Earth to the new planet. The colonists, of course, are under our protection, maintaining full citizenship unless they request independence, which is freely granted.

"If you would like to see it for purposes of clarification, you're welcome to examine our file on Martin Holliday, a citizen who is fairly typical of these real estate operators, and who has just filed an option on his second planet." Smiling, Marlowe extended the folder.

"Thank you, I should like to," ud Klavan said, and took the file from Marlowe. He leafed through it rapidly, pausing, after asking Marlowe's leave, to make notes on some of the information, and then handed it back.

"Most interesting," ud Klavan observed. "However, if you'll enlighten me—This man, Martin Holliday; wouldn't there seem to be very little incentive for him, considering his age, even if there is the expectation of a high monetary return? Particularly since his first attempt, while not a failure, was not an outstanding financial success?"

Marlowe shrugged helplessly. "I tend to agree with you thoroughly, ud Klavan, but—" he smiled, "you'll agree, I'm sure, that one Earthman's boredom is another's incentive? We are not a rigorously logical race, ud Klavan."

"Quite," the Dovenilid replied.

Marlowe stared at his irrevocable clock. His interphone light flickered, and he touched the switch absently.

"Yes, Mary?"

"Will there be anything else, Mr. Secretary?"

"No, thank you, Mary. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

There was no appeal. The day was over, and he had to go home.

He stared helplessly at his empty office, his mind automatically counting the pairs of departing footsteps that sounded momentarily as clerks and stenographers crossed the walk below his partly-open window. Finally he rolled his chair back and pushed himself to his feet. Disconsolate, he moved irresolutely to the window and watched the people leave.

Washington—aging, crowded Washington, mazed by narrow streets, carrying the burden of the severe, unimaginative past on its grimy architecture—respired heavily under the sinking sun.

The capital ought to be moved, he thought as he'd thought every night at this time. Nearer the heart of the empire. Out of this steamy bog. Out of this warren.

His heavy lips moved into an ironical comment on his own thoughts. No one was ever going to move the empire's traditional seat. There was too much nostalgia concentrated here, along with the humidity. Some day, when the Union was contiguous with the entire galaxy, men would still call Washington, on old, out-of-the-way Earth, their capital. Man was not a rigorously logical race, as a race.

The thought of going home broke out afresh, insidiously avoiding the barriers of bemusement which he had tried to erect, and he turned abruptly away from the window, moving decisively so as to be able to move at all. He yanked open a desk drawer and stuffed his jacket pockets with candy bars, ripping the film from one and chewing on its end while he put papers in his brief case.

Finally, he could not delay any longer. Everyone else was out of the building, and the robots were taking over. Metal treads spun along the corridors, bearing brooms, and the robot switchboards guarded the communications of the Ministry. Soon the char-robots would be bustling into this very office. He sighed and walked slowly out, down the empty halls where no human eye could see him waddling.

He stepped into his car, and as he opened the door the automatic recording said "Home, please," in his own voice. The car waited until he was settled and then accelerated gently, pointing for his apartment.

The recording had been an unavoidable but vicious measure of his own. He'd had to resort to it, for the temptation to drive to a terminal, to an airport, or rocket field, or railroad station——had become excruciating.

The car stopped for a pedestrian light, and a sports model bounced jauntily to a stop beside it. The driver cocked an eyebrow at Marlowe and chuckled. "Say, Fatso, which one of you's the Buick?" Then the light changed, the car spurted away, and left Marlowe cringing.

He would not get an official car and protect himself with its license number. He would not be a coward. He not!

His fingers shaking, he tore the film from another candy bar.

Marlowe huddled in his chair, the notebook clamped on one broad thigh by his heavy hand, his lips mumbling nervously while his pencil-point checked off meter.

"Dwell in aching discontent," he muttered. "No. Not that." He stared down at the floor, his eyes distant.

"Bitter discontent," he whispered. He grunted softly with breath that had to force its way past the constricting weight of his hunched chest. "Bitter dwell." He crossed out the third line, substituted the new one, and began to read the first two verses to himself.

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He smiled briefly, content. It still wasn't perfect, but it was getting closer. He continued:

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"What are you doing, David?" his wife asked over his shoulder.

Flinching, he pulled the notebook closer into his lap, bending forward in an instinctive effort to protect it.

The warm, loving, sawing voice went on. "Are you writing another poem, David? Why, I thought you'd given that up!"

"It's ... it's nothing, really, uh ... Leonora. Nothing much. Just a ... a thing I've had running around my head. Wanted to get rid of it."

His wife leaned over and kissed his cheek clumsily. "Why, you old big dear! I'll bet it's for me. Isn't it, David? Isn't it for me?"

He shook his head in almost desperate regret. "I'm ... I'm afraid not, uh—" Snorer. "It's about something else, Leonora."

"Oh." She came around the chair, and he furtively wiped his cheek with a hasty hand. She sat down facing him, smiling with entreaty. "Would you read it to me anyway, David? Please, dear?"

"Well, it's not ... not finished yet—not right."

"You don't have to, David. It's not important. Not really." She sighed deeply.

He picked up the notebook, his breath cold in his constricted throat. "All right," he said, the words coming out huskily, "I'll read it. But it's not finished yet."

"If you don't want to—"

He began to read hurriedly, his eyes locked on the notebook, his voice a suppressed hoarse, spasmodic whisper.

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"David, are you sure about those last lines?" She smiled apologetically. "I know I'm old-fashioned, but couldn't you change that? It seems so ... so harsh. And I think you may have unconsciously borrowed it from someone else. I can't help thinking I've heard it before, somewhere? Don't you think so?"

"I don't know, dear. You may be right about that word, but it doesn't really matter, does it? I mean, I'm not going to try to get it published, or anything."

" know, dear, but still—"

He was looking at her desperately.

"I'm sorry, dear!" she said contritely. "Please go on. Don't pay any attention to my stupid comments."

"They're not stupid—"

"Please, dear. Go on."

His fingers clamped on the edge of the notebook.

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"Oh, that's good, darling! That's very good. I'm proud of you, David."

"I think it stinks," he said evenly, "but, anyway, there are two more verses."

""

Grimly, he spat out the last eight lines.

"

"

Leonora, recoiling from his cold fury, was a shaking pair of shoulders and a mass of lank hair supported by her hands on her face while she sobbed.

"

"Good night, Leonora."

The light flickered on Marlowe's interphone.

"Good morning, Mr. Secretary."

"Good morning, Mary. What's up?"

"Harrison's being deported from Dovenil, sir. There's a civil crime charged against him. Quite a serious one."

Marlowe's eyebrows went up. "How much have we got on it?"

"Not too much, sir. Harrison's report hasn't come in yet. But the story's on

the news broadcasts now, sir. We haven't been asked to comment yet, but Emigration has been called by several news outlets, and the Ministry for Education just called here and inquired whether it would be all right to publish a general statement of their exchange students' careful instructions against violating local customs."

Marlowe's glance brooded down on the mass of papers piled in the tray of his IN box. "Give me a tape of a typical broadcast," he said at last. "Hold everything else. Present explanation to all news outlets: None now, statement forthcoming after preliminary investigation later in the day. The Ministry regrets this incident deeply, and will try to settle matters as soon and as amicably as possible, et cetera, et cetera. O.K.?"

"Yes, sir."

He swung his chair around to face the screen let into a side wall, and colors began to flicker and run in the field almost immediately. They steadied and sharpened, and the broadcast tape began to roll.

Dateline: Dovenil, Sector Three, Day 183, 2417 GST. Your Topical News reporter on this small planet at the Union's rim was unable today to locate for comment any of the high officials of this alien civilization directly concerned with the order for the deportation of exchange student-observer Hubert Harrison, charged with theft and violent assault on the person of a Dovenilid citizen. Union citizen Harrison was unavailable for comment at this time, but Topical News will present his views and such other clues when more ensues.

Marlowe grunted. Journalese was getting out of hand again. That last rhyming sentence was sure to stick in the audience's brains. It might be only another advertising gimmick, but if they started doing it with the body of the news itself, it might be well to feed Topical enough false leads to destroy what little reputation for comprehensibility they had left.

He touched his interphone switch.

"Uh ... Mary, what was the hooper on that broadcast?"

"Under one per cent, sir."

Which meant that, so far, the Body Politic hadn't reacted.

"Thank you. Is there anything else coming in?"

"Not at the moment, sir."

"What's—" Cabbage. "What's Dalish ud Klavan doing?"

"His residence is the Solar Hostel, sir. The management reports that he is still in his room, and has not reserved space on any form of long-distance transportation. He has not contacted us, either, and there is a strong probability that he may still be unaware of what's happened."

"How many calls did he make yesterday, either before or after he was here,

and to whom?"

"I can get you a list in ten minutes, sir."

"Do that, Mary."

He switched off, sat slapping the edge of his desk with his hand, and switched on again.

"Mary, I want the GenSurvs on the Dovenil area to a depth of ten cubic lights."

"Yes, sir."

"And get me Mr. Mead on the phone, please."

"Yes, sir."

Marlowe's lips pulled back from his teeth as he switched off. He snatched a candy bar out of his drawer, tore the film part way off, then threw it back in the drawer as his desk phone chimed.

"Here, Chris."

"Here, Mr. Marlowe."

"Look, Chris—has Holliday left Earth yet?"

"Yes, sir. Yes, Dave."

"Where is he?"

"Luna, en route to Karlshaven. He was lucky enough to have me arrange for his accidentally getting a ride on a GenSurv ship that happened to be going out that way, if you follow me." Mead grinned.

"Get him back."

The smile blanked out. "I can't do that, Mr. Marlowe! He'd never be able to take it. You should have seen him when I put him on the shuttle. We doped him up with EasyRest, and even then his subconscious could the bulkheads around him, even in his sleep. Those shuttles are small, and they don't have ports."

"We can't help that. We need him, and I've got to talk to him first. Personally."

Mead bit his lip. "Yes, sir."

"Dave."

"Yes ... Dave."

Dalish ud Klavan sat easily in his chair opposite Marlowe. He rested one digit on his notebook and waited.

"Ud Klavan," Marlowe said amiably, "you're undoubtedly aware by now that your opposite number on Dovenil has been charged with a civil crime and deported."

The Dovenilid nodded. "An unfortunate incident. One that I regret personally, and which I am sure my own people would much rather not have had happen."

"Naturally." Marlowe smiled. "I simply wanted to reassure you that this incident does not reflect on your own status in any way. We are investigating our representative, and will take appropriate action, but it seems quite clear that the fault is not with your people. We have already forwarded reparations and a note of apology to your government. As further reparation, I wish to assure you personally that we will coöperate with your personal observations in every possible way. If there is anything at all you wish to know—even what might, under ordinary conditions, be considered restricted information—just call on us."

Ud Klavan's crest stirred a fraction of an inch, and Marlowe chuckled inwardly. Well, even a brilliant spy might be forgiven an outward display of surprise under these circumstances.

The Dovenilid gave him a piercing look, but Marlowe presented a featureless facade of bulk.

The secretary chuckled in his mind once more. He doubted if ud Klavan could accept the hypothesis that Marlowe did not know he was a spy. But the Dovenilid must be a sorely confused being at this point.

"Thank you, Marlowe," he said finally. "I am most grateful, and I am sure my people will construe it as yet another sign of the Union's friendship."

"I hope so, ud Klavan," Marlowe replied. Having exchanged this last friendly lie, they went through the customary Dovenilid formula of leave-taking.

Marlowe slapped his interphone switch as soon as the alien was gone. "Uh ... Mary, what's the latest on Holliday?"

"His shuttle lands at Idlewild in half an hour, sir."

"All right, get Mr. Mead. Have him meet me out front, and get an official car to take us to the field. I'll want somebody from Emigration to go with us. Call Idlewild and have them set up a desk and chairs for four out in the middle of the field. Call the Ministry for Traffic and make sure that field stays clear until we're through with it. My Ministerial prerogative, and no back-talk. I want that car in ten minutes."

"Yes, sir."

Mary's voice was perfectly even, without the slightest hint that there was anything unusual happening. Marlowe switched off and twisted his mouth.

He picked up the GenSurv on the Dovenil area and began skimming it rapidly.

He kept his eyes carefully front as he walked out of his office, past the battery of clerks in the outer office, and down the hall. He kept them rigidly fixed on the door of his personal elevator which, during the day, was human-operated under the provisions of the Human Employment Act of 2302. He met Mead in front of

the building and did not look into the eyes of Bussard, the man from Emigration, as they shook hands. He followed them down the walk in a sweating agony of obliviousness, and climbed into the car with carefully normal lack of haste.

He sat sweating, chewing a candy bar, for several minutes before he spoke. Then, slowly, he felt his battered defenses reassert themselves, and he could actually look at Bussard, before he turned to Mead.

"Now, then," he rapped out a shade too abruptly before he caught himself. "Here's the GenSurv on the Dovenil area, Chris. Anything in it you don't know already?"

"I don't think so, sir."

"O.K., dig me up a habitable planet—even a long-term False-E will do—close to Dovenil, but not actually in their system. If it's at all possible, I want that world in a system without any rich planets. And I don't want any rich systems anywhere near it. If you can't do that, arrange for the outright sale of all mineral and other resource rights to suitable companies. I want that planet to be habitable, but I want it to be impossible for any people on it to get at enough resources to achieve a technological culture. Can do?"

Mead shook his head. "I don't know."

"You've got about fifteen minutes to find out. I'm going to start talking to Holliday, and when I tell him I've got another planet for him, I'll be depending on you to furnish one. Sorry to pile it on like this, but must be."

Mead nodded. "Right, Mr. Marlowe. That's why I draw pay."

"Good boy. Now, uh—" Rabbit. "Bussard. I want you to be ready to lay out a complete advertising and prospectus program. Straight routine work, but about four times normal speed. The toughest part of it will be following the lead that Chris and I set. Don't be surprised at anything, and act like it happens every day."

"Yes, Mr. Marlowe."

"Right."

Bussard looked uncomfortable. "Ah ... Mr. Marlowe?"

"Yes?"

"About this man, Harrison. I presume all this is the result of what happened to him on Dovenil. Do you think there's any foundation in truth for what they say he did? Or do you think it's just an excuse to get him off their world?"

Marlowe looked at him coldly. "Don't be an ass," he snorted.

Martin Holliday climbed slowly out of the shuttle's lock and moved fumblingly down the stairs, leaning on the attendant's arm. His face was a mottled gray, and his hands shook uncontrollably. He stepped down to the tarmac and his head turned from side to side as his eyes gulped the field's distances.

Marlowe sat behind the desk that had been put down in the middle of this

emptiness, his eyes brooding as he looked at Holliday. Bussard stood beside him, trying nervously to appear noncommittal, while Mead went up to the shaking old man, grasped his hand, and brought him over to the desk.

Marlowe shifted uncomfortably. The desk was standard size, and he had to sit far away from it. He could not feel at ease in such a position.

His thick fingers went into the side pocket of his jacket and peeled the film off a candy bar, and he began to eat it, holding it in his left hand, as Mead introduced Holliday.

"How do you do, Mr. Holliday?" Marlowe said, his voice higher than he would have liked it, while he shook the man's hand.

"I'm ... I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Secretary," Holliday replied. His eyes were darting past Marlowe's head.

"This is Mr. Bussard, of Emigration, and you know Mr. Mead, of course. Now, I think we can all sit down."

Mead's chair was next to Holliday's, and Bussard's was to one side of the desk, so that only Marlowe, unavoidably, blocked his complete view of the stretching tarmac.

"First of all, Mr. Holliday, I'd like to thank you for coming back. Please believe me when I say we would not have made such a request if it were not urgently necessary."

"It's all right," Holliday said in a low, apologetic voice. "I don't mind."

Marlowe winced, but he had to go on.

"Have you seen a news broadcast recently, Mr. Holliday?"

The man shook his head in embarrassment. "No, sir. I've been ... asleep most of the time."

"I understand, Mr. Holliday. I didn't really expect you had under the circumstances. The situation is this:

"Some time ago, our survey ships, working out in their usual expanding pattern, encountered an alien civilization on a world designated Moore II on our maps, and which the natives call Dovenil. It was largely a routine matter, no different from any other alien contact which we've had. They had a relatively high technology, embracing the beginnings of interplanetary flight, and our contact teams were soon able to work out a diplomatic status mutually satisfactory to both.

"Social observers were exchanged, in accordance with the usual practice, and everything seemed to be going well."

Holliday nodded out of painful politeness, not seeing the connection with himself. Some of his nervousness was beginning to fade, but it was impossible for him to be really at ease with so many people near him, with all of Earth's billions lurking at the edge of the tarmac.

"However," Marlowe went on as quickly as he could, "today, our representative was deported on a trumped-up charge. Undoubtedly, this is only the first move in some complicated scheme directed against the Union. What it is, we do not yet know, but further observation of the actions of their own representative on this planet has convinced us that they are a clever, ruthless people, living in a society which would have put Machiavelli to shame. They are single-minded of purpose, and welded into a tight group whose major purpose in life is the service of the state in its major purpose, which, by all indications, is that of eventually dominating the universe.

"You know our libertarian society. You know that the Union government is almost powerless, and that the Union itself is nothing but a loose federation composed of a large number of independent nations tied together by very little more than the fact that we are all Earthmen.

"We are almost helpless in the face of such a nation as the Dovenilids. They have already outmaneuvered us once, despite our best efforts. There is no sign that they will not be able to do so again, at will.

"We must, somehow, discover what the Dovenilids intend to do next. For this reason, I earnestly request that you accept our offer of another planet than the one you have optioned, closer to the Dovenilid system. We are willing, under these extraordinary circumstances, to consider your credit sufficient for the outright purchase of half the planet, and Mr. Bussard, here, will do his utmost to get you suitable colonists for the other half as rapidly as it can be done. Will you help us, Mr. Holliday?"

Marlowe sank back in his chair. He became conscious of a messy feeling in his left hand, and looked down to discover the half-eaten candy bar had melted. He tried furtively to wipe his hand clean on the underside of the desk, but he knew Bussard had noticed, and he cringed and cursed himself.

Holliday's face twisted nervously.

"I ... I don't know—"

"Please don't misunderstand us, Mr. Holliday," Marlowe said. "We do not intend to ask you to spy for us, nor are we acting with the intention of now establishing a base of any sort on the planet. We simply would like to have a Union world near the Dovenilid system. Whatever Dovenil does will not have gathered significant momentum by the end of your life. You will be free to end your days exactly as you have always wished, and the precautions we have outlined will ensure that there will be no encroachments on your personal property during that time. We are planning for the next generation, when Dovenil will be initiating its program of expansion. It is then that we will need an established outpost near their borders."

"Yes," Holliday said hesitantly, "I can understand that. I ... I don't know," he

repeated. "It seems all right. And, as you say, it won't matter, during my lifetime, and it's more than I had really hoped for." He looked nervously at Mead. "What do you think, Mr. Mead? You've always done your best for me."

Mead shot one quick glance at Marlowe. "I think Mr. Marlowe's doing his best for the Union," he said finally, "and I know he is fully aware of your personal interests. I think what he's doing is reasonable under the circumstances, and I think his proposition to you, as he's outlined it, is something which you cannot afford to not consider. The final decision is up to you, of course."

Holliday nodded slowly, staring down at his hands. "Yes, yes, I think you're right, Mr. Mead." He looked up at Marlowe. "I'll be glad to help. And I'm grateful for the consideration you've shown me."

"Not at all, Mr. Holliday. The Union is in your debt."

Marlowe wiped his hand on the underside of the desk again, but he only made matters worse, for his fingers picked up some of the chocolate he had removed before.

"Mr. Mead, will you give Mr. Holliday the details on the new planet?" he said, trying to get his handkerchief out without smearing his suit. He could almost hear Bussard snickering.

Holliday signed the new option contract and shook Marlowe's hand. "I'd like to thank you again, sir. Looking at it from my point of view, it's something for nothing—at least, while I'm alive. And it's a very nice planet, too, from the way Mr. Mead described it. Even better than Karlshaven."

"Nevertheless, Mr. Holliday," Marlowe said, "you have done the Union a great service. We would consider it an honor if you allowed us to enter your planet in our records under the name of Holliday."

He kept his eyes away from Mead.

Martin Holliday's eyes were shining. "Thank you, Mr. Marlowe," he said huskily.

Marlowe could think of no reply. Finally, he simply nodded. "It's been a pleasure meeting you, Mr. Holliday. We've arranged transportation, and your shuttle will be taking off very shortly."

Holliday's face began to bead with fresh perspiration at the thought of bulkheads enclosing him once more, but he managed to smile, and then ask, hesitantly: "May I ... may I wait for the shuttle out here, sir?"

"Certainly. We'll arrange for that. Well, good-by, Mr. Holliday."

"Good-by, Mr. Marlowe. Good-by, Mr. Bussard. And good-by, Mr. Mead. I don't suppose you'll be seeing me again."

"Good luck, Mr. Holliday," Mead said.

Marlowe twisted awkwardly on the car's back seat, wiping futilely at the

long smear of chocolate on his trouser pocket.

Well, he thought, at least he'd given the old man his name on the star maps until Earthmen stopped roving.

At least he'd given him that.

Mead was looking at him. "I don't suppose we've got time to let him die in peace, have we?" he asked.

Marlowe shook his head.

"I suppose we'll have to start breaking him immediately, won't we?"

Marlowe nodded.

"I'll get at it right away, sir."

Does everyone have to hate me? Can't anyone understand? Even you, uh—Creed. Even you, Mead?

Dalish ud Klavan, stooped and withered, sat hopelessly, opposite Marlowe, who sat behind his desk like a grizzled polar bear, his thinning mane of white hair unkempt and straggling.

"Marlowe, my people are strangling," the old Dovenilid said.

Marlowe looked at him silently.

"The Holliday Republic has signed treaty after treaty with us, and still their citizens raid our mining planets, driving away our own people, stealing the resources we must have if we are to live."

Marlowe sighed. "There's nothing I can do."

"We have gone to the Holliday government repeatedly," ud Klavan pleaded. "They tell us the raiders are criminals, that they are doing their best to stop them. But they still buy the metal the raiders bring them."

"They have to," Marlowe said. "There are no available resources anywhere within practicable distances. If they're to have any civilization at all, they've to buy from the outlaws."

"But they are members of the Union!" ud Klavan protested. " won't you do anything to stop them?"

"We can't," Marlowe said again. "They're members of the Union, yes, but they're also a free republic. We have no administrative jurisdiction over them, and if we attempted to establish one our citizens would rise in protest all over our territory."

"Then we're finished. Dovenil is a dead world."

Marlowe nodded slowly. "I am very sorry. If there is anything I can do, or that the Ministry can do, we will do it. But we cannot save the Dovenilid state."

Ud Klavan looked at him bitterly. "Thank you," he said. "Thank you for your generous offer of a gracious funeral.

"I don't understand you!" he burst out suddenly. "I don't understand you people! Diplomatic lies, yes. Expediency, yes! But this ... this madness, this fanatical, illogical devotion of the state in the cause of a people who will tolerate no state! This ... no, this I cannot understand."

Marlowe looked at him, his eyes full of years.

"Ud Klavan," he said, "you are quite right. We are a race of maniacs. And that is why Earthmen rule the galaxy. For our treaties are not binding, and our promises are worthless. Our government does represent our people. It represents our people as they once were. The delay in the democratic process is such that the treaty signed today fulfills the promise of yesterday—but today the Body Politic has formed a new opinion, is following a new logic which is completely at variance with that of yesterday. An Earthman's promise—expressed in words or deeds—is good . A second later, new factors have entered into the total circumstances, and a new chain of logic has formed in his head—to be altered again, a few seconds later."

He thought, suddenly, of that poor claustrophobic devil, Holliday, harried from planet to planet, never given a moment's rest—and civilizing, civilizing, spreading the race of humankind wherever he was driven. Civilizing with a fervor no hired dummy could have accomplished, driven by his fear to sell with all the real estate agent's talent that had been born in him, selling for the sake of money with which to buy that land he needed for his peace—and always being forced to sell a little too much.

Ud Klavan rose from his chair. "You are also right, Marlowe. You are a race of maniacs, gibbering across the stars. And know, Marlowe, that the other races of the universe hate you."

Marlowe with a tremendous effort heaved himself out of his chair.

"Hate us?" He lumbered around the desk and advanced on the frightened Dovenilid, who was retreating backwards before his path.

"Can't you see it? Don't you understand that, if we are to pursue any course of action over a long time—if we are ever going to achieve a galaxy in which an Earthman can some day live at peace with himself—we must each day violate all the moral codes and creeds which we held inviolate the day before? That we must fight against every ideal, every principle which our fathers taught us, because they no longer apply to our new logic?

" hate us!" He thrust his fat hand, its nails bitten down to the quick and beyond, in front of the cringing alien's eyes.

"You poor, weak, single-minded, ineffectual thing! We hate ourselves!"

THE CLEAN AND WHOLESOME LAND

Utopia had been reached. All the problems of mankind had been solved. It was the perfect State. If you doubted it, you died.

While Professor Cargill lectured from the rostrum, Neal Pardeau prowled the dark auditorium. This, he knew, was the place to find them. Here was where they whispered and plotted and schemed—feeling safe in this pure, hard core of patriotism.

Safe because Cargill was the Director of Education in the New State, just as Pardeau was the Director of Public Security. Safe because Cargill's lectures were given before a commanded audience, with attendance strictly mandatory.

The insistence was not really necessary of course. The people would have come to hear Cargill regardless. His was a compelling, magnetic personality. Even now his great voice was booming out:

"—and upon this anniversary of the New State, we can look out with great pride upon a clean and wholesome land. With strong emotion, we can look upon the physical manifestation of our glorious principles—that only through self-effacement—through fanatic love for the state—can the individual come to complete physical and mental fruition. Upon this anniversary we see our enemies, both within and without, broken, and completely subjugated—"

This was the place they whispered and schemed and plotted. Pardeau prowled the aisles, his eyes piercing the darkness—spotting them, cataloguing them. And thus he came upon Emil Hillerman, his Deputy of Vital Intelligence sitting dutifully in the end seat of a middle aisle. Hillerman's thick lips hung lax, his eyes squinted laboriously as he sought to follow the thread of Cargill's lecture.

Pardeau tapped Hillerman on the shoulder. The latter started guiltily. He whirled and sought to identify Pardeau in the semi-darkness. Pardeau said, "Please step outside with me. I have some questions."

There was fear in Hillerman's bearing as he got clumsily to his feet and followed Pardeau. But none of Cargill's speech was missed. A battery of loudspeakers carried it even into the foyer where Pardeau stopped and turned on Hillerman.

He regarded the man through cold, calculating eyes. He seemed to be both enjoying Hillerman's discomfort and also listening to Cargill's booming words.

"—these pale weaklings, these traitors with twitching muscles and twitching minds who skulked in dark places have been finally and decisively defeated. Even their vaunted leader—"

"What have you been doing," Pardeau asked, "relative to Karl Lenster?"

The frightened Hillerman licked his fat lower lip as he sought for words. "Everything—everything possible. But Lenster is clever. You know that. You know that yourself."

Pardeau's eyes bored into those of the Intelligence Director. They were noted for their icy penetration, but upon this night they were like steel knives. It was as though he surveyed Hillerman from behind the bulwark of some new and hostile information. Even as he stared, Cargill was booming from the rostrum:

"—Karl Lenster, their peerless leader—"

And Cargill's voice crackled with the inflections of pure contempt.

"—a degenerate—a dope addict whose greatness lay only in the realms of his sensual dreams. A weak, pitiful figure bereft of followers, cringing alone in.."

When Pardeau spoke, his voice held a new sharpness to complement the new ice in his eyes. He said, "In half an hour I am attending a meeting of the Council. They will want a report. What about Lenster?"

Hillerman looked quickly to right and left, then back at his Chief. He hesitated as though fearing the consequences of what he was about to reveal. "You know of the Wyckoff Chemical Transformation Process—"

"Certainly I know of it," Pardeau blazed. "What about it?"

"I—I—" But Hillerman seemed to lose the courage he'd screwed up to continue in this direction. He straightened and a little of the hangdog servility dropped away. "I am doing all that is humanly possible to apprehend Lenster. All that any man could do. The secret jails are full. My interrogators work night and day. Even a superficial check of my records would show that more has been done in the last six months and is being done now than—"

Pardeau raised an impatient hand, opening a gap of silence into which the voice of Cargill poured.

"—land in which the voice of dissenter is not heard; in which Lenster and men of his despicable ilk are forever crushed and beaten—"

Pardeau was scowling. Almost unconsciously he had held the pause, with hand upraised, until Cargill finished his passage. As Cargill stopped for breath, Pardeau jerked his hand down sharply, completing the gesture. "I have no time for any more of this. And I resent having to seek you out. Next time report to my office as is proper and keep me posted as to your activities. Next—"

Pardeau eyed Hillerman for one blank moment and allowed the threat to reflect clearly that possibly there would not be many more next times. Then he turned and strode swiftly from the foyer.

Cargill's voice had hardly faded when he picked it up again on his car radio. It was a foregone conclusion that every radio in the land would be tuned to the lecture. So great was Cargill's popularity that every citizen traveling in a car would wish to hear it and turn on his receiver. It was foolish not to have a radio properly tuned when Cargill spoke. He was saying:

"—and so under the banner of complete solidarity, we will march forward, a solid phalanx against which no force can stand. Now that our own house is swept clean of vermin—rid forever of carrion like Lenster and his ilk, we can—"

Pardeau had traveled swiftly through the streets at the high speed reserved for higher servants of the New State. Lesser servants of the New State had learned caution and thus no regrettable deaths or maimings occurred; the lesser servants having grown wary and fleet of foot.

Pardeau switched off his motor but left his radio blaring. Cargill's voice followed him up the broad steps of the Executive Building and was just fading out when Pardeau was able to pick it up again from the loudspeaker under the great arches.

He entered the building and traversed the vast foyer to a niche which housed a private elevator. He entered the lift, deserting it on the ninth floor, where he entered an unobtrusive door and joined a group which consisted of the New State's well guarded pool of power and brains.

There was Blanchard of Finance; Keeley, Director of Foreign Education; Masichek, overlord of the nation's larder, and seven others.

When Pardeau entered, all conversation stopped and every man looked up from a luxurious overstuffed chair. Pardeau must certainly have swelled inwardly with pride at this unconscious tribute. It was well known that he held a key position on the chessboard of politics. His was in reality the most important job of all. It was to Pardeau that this powerful group of men looked for that which they most treasured—their own personal safety.

A chair was waiting for Pardeau. He said, "I'm sorry to be late, gentlemen. I have been on a personal tour of inspection. I'm sure you will forgive me however. I have a most interesting report."

He seated himself, timing the action so it coincided with the ebb of applause coming over the speaker—applause from the loyal multitudes who had just heard Professor Cargill end his lecture. As it was now permissible, Blanchard reached under the table and snapped a button. The speaker went silent.

"An interesting report?" Keeley asked.

"Amazingly so," Pardeau said. "I have just unearthed a traitor—a traitor in a

high place."

Every man in the group strove not to react and this striving was in itself a reaction. "Most interesting," Blanchard murmured. "Are you ready to name names?"

"That is my intention, but in order to forestall a great many questions, let me give you a complete background."

Leiderman, Ambassador without Portfolio, and very close to the Man of Almost Sacred Name who never attended these meetings, felt strong enough to evince impatience. "The name, man! First the name. Then the details."

Pardeau smiled coldly. "Very well. The name is, Karl Lenster."

Leiderman sprang from his chair, his face bordering on purple. "Is this a joke, Pardeau? We all know Lenster is the arch-traitor of our times—the leader of the resistance movement. Talk sense!"

Pardeau, not in the least disconcerted, smiled coldly. "I'm sorry. Perhaps I should have said Emil Hillerman, my Deputy of Vital Intelligence, the man who holds immeasurable power in his two hands."

Blanchard was not given to outbursts. But his lips were grim as he said, "We are waiting for you to talk sense, Pardeau."

"The confusion comes from your not allowing me to tell it as I wished. There is a gap between Lenster and Hillerman; one which—with your permission—I will fill."

"Talk, man! Talk!"

"You have all heard of Formula 652, known also as the Wyckoff Chemical Transformation Process."

There were expressions of both understanding and bewilderment. Noting these, Pardeau said, "For those of you who haven't made a point of looking into the thing, I'll explain. Wyckoff, in case you don't recall, was a chemical engineer of more than average ability who stumbled onto this formula before he died, most regretfully, four years ago, in 1984."

Leiderman continued to scowl. "We all know each other, Pardeau. Call a spade a spade. Wyckoff was a reactionary scoundrel whom you did away with for reasons of security."

"Precisely," Pardeau said. "In its essence, the formula is a process for taking over a man's brain—his body—his personality."

"You mean—"

Pardeau refused to be interrupted. "We were of the opinion that Wyckoff, though he and Lenster were great friends, was not able to impart his knowledge to the latter. We took him into custody shortly after he perfected the formula and were fortunate in persuading him to give it to us."

"But he gave it to Lenster also?"

"We were certain, at the time of his death, that he had not been able to do that—we are still certain."

Keeley, with a gesture, requested the floor. "I wonder if you could go into a little more detail concerning the formula—for those of us who—"

"Of course," Pardeau said. "The formula is a combination of six chemicals and the process of transformation is relatively simple, yet highly dangerous to both subjects involved. It means sure death for the proposed host, and if not delicately handled will also result in death for the usurper. The transformation requires three hours to perform. Once completed successfully, the usurper can never return to his own body. It must be destroyed. Also, the mentality of the host vanishes after it is pushed from its original brain tissue through the influence of the formula."

"Then if Wyckoff didn't give the formula to Lenster, it was stolen from our vaults—or wherever it was kept?"

"Exactly. Certain investigations I have made prove beyond doubt that Lenster got to my Deputy, Hillerman. I never considered Hillerman very bright, but I thought him to be honest and loyal. But beyond all doubt, with his aid, Lenster stole the formula—possibly got it verbally—and used it to take Hillerman's body from him." Pardeau smiled grimly. "Therefore, gentlemen, we have a traitor in a high place. My Deputy of Vital Intelligence."

Pardeau sat silent now, seeming to enjoy the fear he had engendered in his colleagues—sat silent until Leiderman said, "You've arrested him of course."

"No. I have not."

"Then get at it, man—get at it."

"I have no intention of arresting Hillerman."

Leiderman's eyes widened as did those of the rest of the company. But Blanchard, even under the impact of such a bombshell had the presence of mind to glance at his watch. Immediately he snapped on the loudspeaker. The voice of Professor Cargill blared forth:

"—and upon this anniversary of the New State, we can look with pride upon a clean and wholesome land—"

It was the rebroadcast, from recordings, of Cargill's speech and no man in his right mind would have refrained from tuning it in because everyone wanted to hear it at least twice.

Leiderman, almost apoplectic, ignored the speech. "Not arresting him! Are you mad?"

"I'm quite sane, and the situation is well in hand." Pardeau grinned and there was wickedness in the grin—wickedness and intelligence. "As I said be-

fore, Hillerman was not a smart man. His job was too much for him and I would have been faced, soon, with the necessity of replacing him regardless. Lenster, on the other hand, is of grade-A intellect. But, gentlemen, he is frightened—badly frightened in his new environment—and, in order to insure his own safety, is doing an excellent job. Ever since the transformation, that department has gained in efficiency until it now ranks as one of the highest in our entire government."

Slowly, Pardeau's strategy dawned on the group. Blanchard suddenly smiled. Then Pardeau scowled and went on with a new and sudden ferocity. "I have the proof, and I have Lenster-Hillerman under my palm. So he stays—continues to do a good job for us. But he'll be watched, gentlemen. He won't be able to go to the bathroom without being under surveillance. We will learn a great deal from him. All we need to know."

"Then you'll arrest him?" the boss of the state larder wanted to know.

Pardeau came to his feet. His fist slammed down on the table. "I shall not arrest him—ever. When the time comes, I shall personally shoot him down in the street like a dog. There will come a day, gentlemen, when you will witness this act of vengeance—when I shall make such an example of Lenster-Hillerman as the resistance will not forget—a morale-crumbling example, I promise you."

"—in which Lenster and his ilk are forever crushed and beaten," the speaker said.

Blanchard took the floor. "Gentlemen—I move a vote of thanks and confidence for our colleague, Neal Pardeau."

The Director of Public Security stood at attention and assayed a sharp, military bow. It was a moment of rare triumph. "Thank you, gentlemen," he said.

An hour later, Lenster-Pardeau was alone in his apartments. He stripped off his uniform with an air of grim satisfaction. While he undressed, he thought of the martyrs to the Cause; the men who had died. He thought of Wyckoff and wished Wyckoff could have had the pleasure of knowing who had usurped the body of Neal Pardeau—Pardeau the Butcher—the infamous Pardeau.

From the speaker came the third and final rebroadcast of Cargill's speech:

"—a clean and wholesome land—"

"A clean and wholesome land," Lenster murmured, and the tone of his voice was a prayer.

COGITO, ERGO SUM

Are the Spirit and the Flesh one and the same thing? Or are they separate entities, dependent and at the same time independent of each other? Perhaps some great Cosmic Law holds this secret. But the one Universal Element that we can depend upon, apparently, is The Lucky Accident.

A warped instant in Space—and two egos are separated from their bodies and lost in a lonely abyss.

I think, therefore I am. That was the first thought I had. Of course not in the same symbols, but with the same meaning.

I awakened, or came alive, or came into existence suddenly, at least my mental consciousness did. "Here am I," I thought, "but what am I, why am I, where am I?"

I had nothing to work with except pure reason. I was *there* because I was not somewhere else. I was certain I was *there* and that was the extent of my knowledge at the moment.

I looked about me—no, I *reasoned* about me. I was surrounded by nothingness, by black nothingness, a vacuum. Immense distances away I could detect light; or rather, I could perceive waves of force passing around me which originated at points vast distances away, vast in relation to my position in the nothingness.

There were waves of force all about me, varying in frequency. The nothingness was alive with waves of force, traveling parallel and tangential to each other without seeming to interfere one with another. I measured them, differentiated between them and finished with the task in a matter of seconds.

How could I do it? It was one of the capabilities I was *created* with.

What was I? I perceived the waves of force. I perceived great quantities of mass—solid, liquid, gas—whirling in vacuum, mass built up out of patterns of basic force. I searched my own being, analyzed myself. I was not gas. I was not solid. I was not even force. Yet I existed. I could reason. I was a beginning, a sudden beginning. And I had duration because I knew that time had elapsed since the moment I *awakened* though I had no means of telling how much time or of even

naming the period.

Could I really be *pure reason*? Can reason exist? Can rational entity exist without a groundwork of matter, or at least of force?

It could. It must. I was rational entity and I existed. Yet I could find nothing of force, nothing to occupy space about my *self*. For all I could ascertain, I might have covered a one-dimensional point in eternity or I might have been spread throughout vast distances.

From this reasoning I concluded that rational entity might occur either as some force unlike that of all natural phenomena in space, or as some combination of these forces at the moment beyond my own power to analyze, even detect. I finished with that for the time being.

How did I come into being? I discarded the question as unanswerable temporarily. What was I before that instant I suddenly reasoned *cogito, ergo sum*? I could not say.

How did I know I even existed, really? Obviously because I was capable of rational thought. But what was thinking? First it was perceiving and accepting my own existence; beyond that, it was recognizing the dark nothingness around me and the forces it contained. I had to exist.

But how did I know nothingness was right? And how did I know its darkness was right? And how did I know the waves of force were *waves* and *force*? And how did I know matter was *matter* and that I was none of these?

"Symbols," I reasoned. "I'm thinking in symbols. I could not reason without symbols; therefore I could not exist as I am without symbols to think with."

Yet whose symbols were they? Where and how did I come by them? I could think back clearly to the instant of my creation, yet I had not invented the symbols in the interim of my existence, nor had they been given to me. What then? They were part of me when I came alive in this universe, had been *invented* some other time and elsewhere by someone else or by what I was before I became the entity of reason I now was.

Then that first flash of perception in nothingness was not spontaneous. There was something behind it. I was something before that moment, in another era of time, perhaps a creature of substance. But what?

I concentrated. I remembered the symbol *Marl*. I was or had been an entity *Marl*. Were there others back there, somewhere? There must have been, must be yet. Was I the only *Marl* who metamorphosed into this state of rational entity? Surely not. Yet I could contact no other rationale around me as far away as I could probe. How far was that? How could I know. Was it far enough to reach the other *Marls*, or were they scattered thinly throughout infinity around me like the flecks of mass?

I was suddenly ill. The symbol *malaise* came to me as the proper description of my malady. I grew dizzy with my sickness. I wished to regurgitate, to cast

off this cold, frightening sensation. Yet I was provided with no physical means of doing it. It filled me throughout all my thinking. It was I. I thought to exist. I thought depression, sickness. Therefore I was the malady and it was a hell of malcontent beyond symbolical description.

What was wrong with me? I was frightened. I was concerned for my existence here alone. What was it called? The idea shimmered there on the fringe of perception, then fairly leaped into my consciousness. Existing alone as pure reason was worse than no-existence, was worse than dying or never having been at all. I need another *Marl*. To exist happily, I must have at least one other *Marl* to communicate with, to share my thoughts, to share my being.

Is this a necessity, a condition peculiar to me as I am, as reason, or is it a condition that came across the barrier with me from that other state? It must be the latter. An entity of pure reason, having come into existence as reason, would need nothing but himself. Why? Because he would be *without emotion*.

"I am *emotional*," I thought. "I am entity of almost pure reason, but I have inherited emotion from my previous state. It is a disorder of thought, but it can be a pleasant disorder when the emotion is the right one; or, if unpleasant, when satisfied.

"But I could not have emotions as I am now. They are *cortical responses*, or are supposed to be. What is *cortical*? No, they are a sort of illogical reasoning, nothing physical—" The rest eluded me.

"I am lonely," I thought. "Loneliness stems from fear and fear is a basic emotion. I am very lonely. I have been lonely for a long time, bringing it with me here. I would rather sate my loneliness than live to eternity, than know all there is to know. What can quell my loneliness? Another like me, another *Marl*—whatever a *Marl* is. I must have, must find another *Marl*."

I began to search. I darted frantically about space like a frightened thing, though I could perceive no movement. I knew I passed from one area of space to another because I could measure slight changes in the position of the stars about me. I knew the points of light were *stars*.

There was duration. I could not know how much. Eternity? A split second? But at last I discovered another like me. No, almost like me, but another *Marl*. The other entity had less of reason, more emotion. It was frightened and lonely. The *Marl's* whole existence was that of sickness—of loneliness, which is fear. The *Marl* was darting about madly, seeking, seeking a thing like itself. What was it, like me but different?

As I came in, I measured our similarity and differences. Rationally we were identical, or almost so. Emotionally we were different, vastly different. "*Marls* appear to exist as rationale and emotion," I reasoned. "Beyond that I cannot go."

The other *Marl* perceived me, darted frantically toward me, then slowed.

We came together, touched like—*like two cautious fish meeting in a dark pool and touching mouths to substantiate identical species*.

The other *Marl* was satisfied with my identity. It leaped frantically at me, raced around me, through me, finally stopped, pervading me, while *vibrating* in sheer relief and happiness. I felt the great fear-loneliness in the other *Marl* begin to recede and in its place came an almost overpowering euphoria. It was *contentment*, and it stemmed from the basic emotion *love*. I knew this at once.

I suddenly realized that I too was relieved, that I was no longer sick with fear-loneliness. It was good, this existing of the other within me or simultaneously with me. Or was it I within the other? It sated our fear emotion and made, created a love-euphoria.

"I am happy I found you," I communicated. "I was lonely for another *Marl*. You are a *Marl*?"

The other hesitated, thinking. "No. I am *Pat*. I am different from you. But it is chiefly emotional. It is good."

"You are a *Pat*," I returned in disappointment. "I had hoped to find another *Marl*."

"Don't be disappointed," the *Pat* soothed. "We are alike, really. Almost so. Like—like flame and gas are both substance yet different. We are two types of the same thing. I am no longer frightened. I am no longer lonely. You are good for me."

I was relieved because I wanted to be. I believed the other *Marl* —no, the *Pat*—because I wanted to believe. I did not bother to rationalize. I felt elation.

"Then in that other time, that other place we both belonged to a—a common group, with another name?" I suggested.

"I believe so," the *Pat* answered.

"How was it when you came awake?" I asked. "Can you remember?"

"I think so. I recall I was born here in fright because it was all wrong. I was not in my natural state, so it was not right." The *Pat* paused to think. "I remember there was great speed and I was born in fright. Were you?"

"No," I answered. "I was not frightened at first. And I was never frightened to the degree you were. I was mostly lonely, which is related to fear. But when I first conceived of my existence here I was coolly logical. I awakened *reasoning*—realizing that I existed."

"I suppose it has to do with our emotional differences," the *Pat* beside me or with me or within me communicated.

"Do you recall where in space you came from?" I asked. "I must have been doubting my existence at first so intensely I did not observe. You seem to have taken your own being for granted, thus you were, perhaps, more observant."

"I—I think so." The *Pat* hesitated and I knew it was observing the stars around us. "Yes. Come with me. I think I know where."

I stayed with the *Pat*, a part of it, and we lurched through space. Rather, we ceased to exist at one point in space and existed in another. How far? Distances meant nothing.

"It was here," the *Pat* informed me finally.

Something was wrong here. The interweaving waves of force were all wrong. There was a disorder, a great cancer in space. The waves interfered with the progress of each other all along a great barrier. It was not natural, not like it was elsewhere.

"Something is wrong with the waves of force crossing this area. They interfere with each other. New forces are created. Do you detect it?" I communicated.

"I feel it," the *Pat* answered. "It is a sickness in space like—like our loneliness."

I knew the comparison was ridiculous but I let it pass. "You said you came alive at great speed. I could have been traveling too. We must have plunged into this barrier. It seems to me that emotions must originate in a *physical* being; perhaps reason could be free, but not emotion. I don't know. But I have a theory. I believe our *physical* selves still exist somewhere in space. The barrier, perhaps, interfered with the normal functioning of our mental equipment. We exist at one point in space and we are thinking, experiencing emotions at another point. It's as if our minds are—are broadcasting our thoughts and emotions far away from our physical selves. Either that, or our rationales were torn free and only our emotions are broadcast. Does that sound logical?"

"Yes," the *Pat* agreed, "I believe that is the answer."

I felt that the *Pat* was pleased with my theory, that it greatly admired my reasoning. I also perceived that it had no idea what I meant by the explanation. I did not mind.

"You said you were moving at great speed," I continued. "Can you remember the line, the direction you were traveling in?"

The *Pat* hesitated only a moment. "Yes. You perceive the star cluster there, the triangular one? My heading was in that direction, but it was changing fast."

"Then we could find nothing by traveling toward the triangular cluster?"

"No. I was moving in an arc in the direction of the distorted square cluster there. Do you see it?"

"Yes," I answered, knowing her use of the word *see* was unconscious. "That is Cetus."

"Cetus?" The *Pat* was startled. "How do you know that?"

"I don't know. The name came to me. It seemed right to call it that."

"It—it's all so frightening!"

I had no time for pampering our emotions, though I was at great peace with the *Pat* so near me. Time might prove vital. "Neither would it do any good to travel in the direction of Cetus," I said.

"No. No," the *Pat* communicated. "If there is any object of matter or force I was a part of in that other existence traveling through space, it is in an arc. The best we can do is take an arbitrary direction between the triangular cluster and the one called Cetus and hope to intercept the object, the other part of me, whatever it is."

"Come with me," I ordered.

I discovered the object of mass hurtling through space before the *Pat* did. It was symmetrical and metallic. I tore myself away from my companion and darted to meet it. I discovered it was a shell, a hollow thing, and I passed inside. There was a room there. There were projections and circles of transparent matter. I experienced the symbol *dials*.

There were two other creatures seated close to the dials, things of matter, and their substance was protoplasm. But there was no rationale present in either of them. I examined the living matter of the smaller one swiftly. Organs seemed poised in a suspended state. The creature I observed, housed in a protective shell, seemed paralyzed or dead. I remembered the word *dead*.

Then the *Pat* was with me again. "I—I feel something, *Marl*. I am frightened. What are they, those things there?"

"They seem to be—" I stopped communicating.

The *Pat* had disappeared!

The thing of protoplasm nearest me was moving but I was no longer interested. I remember the *Pat* had touched the upper extremity of the creature and had vanished, had ceased to be.

The old sickness was back. I was lonely. I wanted the other entity. I could not, did not wish to exist without the *Pat*.

I darted frantically about the metal shell, here and there, searching, searching. Where was the *Pat*? I *screamed* for it. I thought *Pat* as far away as I could reach, but there was no reaction, no response at all.

In my frenzy, I was back beside the creatures of protoplasm before I realized it, near the one I had not yet examined.

"Perhaps they took her," I thought. It was not logical, but it was a hope. Hope is emotional; I was becoming more emotional than rational.

I touched the larger of the two creatures, experimentally; moved cautiously inside it, searching, searching.

Suddenly I was seized by a great force, an inexorable power that grasped

me and wrenched me, tearing me from the point in space I had occupied a moment before. My perception blurred, but I was not frightened. Without the *Pat* I did not care what happened. I was intensely curious. "So this is how it is," I reasoned in a flash, "to *cease to be*."

And I ceased to be....

Marlow shook his head. I must have dozed, he thought. He glanced at the chronometer on the console ahead. No, only a minute or two had elapsed since the last time he had checked.

"Sleepy head! Wake up and live!"

He looked to his right. Pat sat in the navigator's seat smiling at him.

"I didn't sleep, honestly," he protested. "We hit some sort of barrier back there. It knocked me out for a moment. I had the damnedest impression—"

"Remember what you promised!" She swiveled the seat about to face him. "No more scientific lectures on the mysteries of space or I'll return to earth. You know my poor brain can't absorb it."

"You win," he grinned, running calloused fingers through his greying crewcut. He leaned forward and kissed her briefly. "How did an old space hermit like me ever win a flower-garden bride in the first place?"

They laughed together, and he felt secure within the metallic shell surrounding them, no longer alone.

CONQUEST OVER TIME

"Now this here planet," he said cautiously, "is whacky in a lot of ways. First of all they call it Mert. Just plain Mert. And they live in houses strictly from Dickens, all carriages, no sewers, narrow streets, stuff like that." But that wasn't all.... Travis, in reaching Diomed III before any others, found himself waging a one-man fight against more than this; he was bucking the strangest way of life you have ever heard of!

What was the startling secret of Diomed III that almost caused Travis to lose his life? And who was Lappy?...

When the radiogram came in it was 10:28 ship's time and old 29 was exactly 3.4 light years away from Diomed III. Travis threw her wide open and hoped for the best. By 4:10 that same afternoon, minus three burned out generators and fronting a warped ion screen, old 29 touched the atmosphere and began homing down. It was a very tense moment. Somewhere down in that great blue disc below a Mapping Command ship sat in an open field, sending up the beam which was guiding them down. But it was not the Mapping Command that was important. The Mapping Command was always first. What mattered now was to come in second, any kind of second, close or wide, mile or eyelash, but second come hell or high water.

The clouds peeled away. Travis staring anxiously down could see nothing but mist and heavy cloud. He could not help sniffing the air and groaning inwardly. There is no smell quite as expensive as that of burned generators. He could hear the Old Man repeating over and over again—as if Allspace was not one of the richest companies in existence—"burned generators, boy, is burned *money*, and don't you forget it!" Fat chance me forgetting it, Travis thought gloomily, twitching his nostrils. But a moment later he did.

For Diomed III was below him.

And Diomed III was an Open Planet.

It happened less often, nowadays, that the Mapping Command ran across intelligent life, and it was even less often that the intelligent life was humanoid. But when it happened it was an event to remember. For space travel had brought with it two great problems. The first was Contact, the second was Trade. For many

years Man had prohibited contact with intelligent humanoids who did not yet have space travel, on the grounds of the much-discussed Maturity Theory. As time went by, however, and humanoid races were discovered which were biologically identical with Man, and as great swarms of completely alien, often hostile races were also discovered, the Maturity Theory went into discard. A human being, ran the new slogan, is a Human Being, and so came the first great Contact Law, which stated that any humanoid race, regardless of its place on the evolutionary scale, was to be contacted. To be accepted, "yea, welcomed," as the phrase went, into the human community. And following this, of course, there came Trade. For it was the businessmen who had started the whole thing in the first place.

Hence the day of the Open Planet. A humanoid race was discovered by the Mapping Command, the M.C. made its investigation, and then sent out the Word. And every company in the Galaxy, be it monstrous huge or piddling small, made a mad rush to be first on the scene. The Government was very strict about the whole business, the idea being that planets should make their contracts with companies rather than the government itself, so that if any shady business arose the company at fault could be kicked out, and there would be no chance of a general war. Also, went the reasoning, under this system there would be no favorites. Whichever company, no matter its resources, had a ship closest at the time of the call, was the one to get first bargaining rights. Under this setup it was very difficult for any one company to grow too large, or to freeze any of the others out, and quite often a single contract on a single planet was enough to transform a fly-by-night outfit into a major concern.

So that was the basis of the Open Planet, but there the real story has only begun. Winning the race did not always mean winning the contract. It was what you found when you got down that made the job of a Contact Man one of the most hazardous occupations in history. Each new planet was wholly and completely new, there were no rules, and what you learned on all the rest meant nothing. You went from a matriarchy which refused absolutely to deal with men (the tenth ship to arrive had a lady doctor and therefore got the contract) to a planet where the earth was sacred and you couldn't dig a hole in it so mining was out, to a planet which considered your visit the end of the world and promptly committed mass suicide. The result of this was that a successful Contact Man had to be a remarkable man to begin with: a combined speed demon, sociologist, financier, diplomat and geologist, all in one. It was a job in which successful men not only made fortunes, they made legends. It was that way with Pat Travis.

Sitting at the viewscreen, watching the clouds whip by and the first dark clots of towns beginning to shape below, Travis thought about the legend. He was a tall, frail, remarkably undernourished looking man with large soft brown eyes. He did not look like a legend and he knew it, and, being a man of great pride, it bothered him. More and more, as the years went by, his competitors blamed his

success on luck. It was not Pat Travis that was the legend, it was the luck of Pat Travis. Over the years he had learned not to argue about it, and it was only during these past few months, when his luck had begun to slip, that he mentioned it at all.

Luck no more makes a legend, he knew, than raw courage makes a fighter. But legends die quick in deep space, and his own had been a-dying for a good long while now, while other lesser men, the luck all theirs, plucked planet after planet from under his nose. Now at the viewscreen he glanced dolefully across the room at his crew: the curly-headed young Dahlinger and the profound Mr. Trippe. In contrast to his own weary relaxation, both of the young men were tensed and anxious, peering into the screen. They had come to learn under the great Pat Travis, but in the last few months what they seemed to have learned most was Luck: if you happened to be close you were lucky and if you weren't you weren't. But if they were to get anywhere in this business, Travis knew, they had to learn that luck, more often than not, follows the man who burns his generators....

He stopped thinking abruptly as a long yellow field came into view. He saw silver flashing in the sun, and his heart jumped into his throat. Old 29 settled fast. One ship or two? In the distance he could see the gray jumbled shapes of a low-lying city. The sun was shining warmly, it was spring on Diomed III, and across the field a blue river sparkled, but Travis paid no attention. There was only one silver gleam. Still he waited, not thinking. But when they were close enough he saw that he was right. The Mapping Command ship was alone. Old 29, burned generators and all, had won the race.

"My boys," he said gravely, turning to the crew, "Pat Travis rides again!" But they were already around him, pounding him on the back. He turned happily back to the screen, for the first time beginning to admire the view. By jing, he thought, what a lovely day!

That was his first mistake.

It was not a lovely day.

It was absolutely miserable.

Travis had his first pang of doubt when he stepped out of the ship.

The field was empty, not a native in sight. But Dahlinger was out before him, standing waist high in the grass and heaving deep lungfuls of the flower-scented air. He yelled that he could already smell the gold.

"I say, Trav," Trippe said thoughtfully from behind him, "where's the fatted calf?"

"In this life," Travis said warily, "one is often disappointed." A figure climbed out of a port over at the Mapping Command ship and came walking slowly toward them. Travis recognized him and grinned.

"Hey, Hort."

"Hey Trav," Horton replied from a distance. But he did not say anything else. He came forward with an odd look on his face. Travis did not understand. Ed Horton was an old buddy and Ed Horton should be happy to see him. Travis felt his second pang. This one went deep.

"Anybody beat us here?"

"No. You're the first, Trav."

Dahlinger whooped. Travis relaxed slightly and even the glacial Trippe could not control a silly grin.

Horton caught a whiff of air from the open lock.

"Burned generators? You must've come like hell." His face showed his respect. Between burning a generator and blowing one entirely there is only a microscopic distance, and it takes a very steady pilot indeed to get the absolute most out of his generators without also spreading himself and his ship over several cubic miles of exploded space.

"Like a striped-tailed ape," Dahlinger chortled. "Man, you should see the boss handle a ship. I thought every second we were going to explode in technicolor."

"Well," Horton said feebly. "Burned generators. Shame."

He lowered his eyes and began toeing the ground. Travis felt suddenly ill.

"What's the matter, Hort?"

Horton shrugged. "I hate like heck to be the one to tell you, Trav, but seein' as I know you, they sent me—"

"Tell me what?" Now Dahlinger and Trippe both realized it and were suddenly silent.

"Well, if only you'd taken a little more time. But not you, not old Pat Travis. By damn, Pat, you came in here like a downhill locomotive, it ain't my fault—"

"Hort, straighten it out. What's not your fault?"

Horton sighed.

"Listen, it's a long story. I've got a buggy over here to take you into town. They're puttin' you up at a hotel so you can look the place over. I'll tell you on the way in."

"The heck with that," Dahlinger said indignantly, "we want to see the *man*."

"You're not goin' to see the man, sonny," Horton said patiently, "You are, as a matter of fact, the last people on the planet the man wants to see right now."

Dahlinger started to say something but Travis shut him up. He told Trippe to stay with the ship and took Dahlinger with him. At the end of the field was a carriage straight out of Seventeenth Century England. And the things that drew it—if you closed your eyes—looked reasonably similar to horses. The three men climbed aboard. There was no driver. Horton explained that the 'horses' would

head straight for the hotel.

"Well all right," Travis said, "what's the story?"

"Don't turn those baby browns on me," Horton said gloomily, "I would have warned you if I could, but you know the law says we can't show favoritism...."

Travis decided the best thing to do was wait with as much patience as possible. After a while Horton had apologized thoroughly and completely, although what had happened was certainly not his fault, and finally got on with the tale.

"Now this here planet," he said cautiously, "is whacky in a lot of ways. First off they call it Mert. Mert. Fine name for a planet. Just plain Mert. And they live in houses strictly from Dickens, all carriages, no sewers, narrow streets, stuff like that. With technology roughly equivalent to seventeenth century. But now—see there, see that building over there?"

Travis followed his pointing finger through the trees. A large white building of blinding marble was coming slowly into view. Travis' eyes widened.

"You see? Just like the blinkin' Parthenon, or Acropolis, whichever it is. All columns and frescoes. In the middle of a town looks just like London. Makes no sense, but there it is. And that's not all. Their government is Grecian too, complete with Senate and Citizens. No slaves though. Well not exactly. You couldn't call them slaves. Or could you? Heck of a question, that—" He paused to brood. Travis nudged him.

"Yes. Well, all that is minor, next to the big thing. This is one of two major countries on the planet. There's a few hill tribes but these make up about 90 percent of the population, so you have to deal with these. They never go to war, well maybe once in a while, but not very often. So no trouble there. The big trouble is one you'd never guess, not in a million years."

He stared at Travis unhappily.

"The whole planet's run on astrology."

He waited for a reaction. Travis said nothing.

"It ain't funny," Horton said. "When I say run on astrology I mean really run. Wait'll you hear."

"I'm not laughing," Travis said. "But is that all? In this business you learn to respect the native customs, so if all we have to do—"

"I ain't finished yet," Horton said ominously, "you don't get the point. *Everything* these people do is based on astrology. And that means business too, lad, business too. Every event that happens on this cockeyed world, from a picnic to a wedding to a company merger or a war, it's all based on astrology. They have it down so exact they even tell you when to sneeze. You ought to see the daily paper. Half of it's solid astrological guidance. All the Senators not only have astrologers, they *are* astrologers. And get this: every man and woman and child alive on

this planet was catalogued the day he was born. His horoscope was drawn up by the public astrologer—a highly honored office—and his future laid out according to what the horoscope said. If his horoscope indicates a man of stature and responsibility, he *becomes*, by God, a man of stature and responsibility. You have to see it to believe it. Kids with good horoscopes are sent to the best schools, people fight to give them jobs. Well, take the courts, for example. When they're trying a case, do they talk about evidence? They do not. They call in a legal astrologer—there's all kinds of branches in the profession—and this joker all by himself determines the guilt or innocence of the accused. By checking the aspects. Take a wedding. Boy meets girl. Boy likes girl. Does boy go see girl? No. He heads straight for an astrologer. The girl's horoscope is on file in the local city hall, just like everybody else. The astrologer compares the charts and determines whether the marriage will be a good one. He is, naturally, a marital astrologer. He gives the word. If he says no they don't marry.

"I could go on for hours. But you really have to see it. Take the case of people who want to have children. They want them born, naturally, at the time of the best possible aspects, so they consult an astrologer and he gives them a list of the best times for a baby to be conceived. These times are not always convenient, sometimes it's 4:18 in the morning and sometimes it's 2:03 Monday afternoon. Yet this is a legitimate excuse for getting out of work. A man goes in, tells his boss it's breeding time, and off he goes without a penny docked. Build a better race, they say. Of course the gestation period is variable, and they never do hit it right on the nose, and also there are still the natural accidents, so quite a few are born with terrible horoscopes—"

"Holy smoke!" Travis muttered. The possibilities of it blossomed in his mind. He began to understand what was coming.

"Now you begin to see?" Horton went on gloomily. "Look what an Earthman represents to these people. We are the unknown, the completely capital U Unknown. Everybody else is a certain definite quantity, his horoscope is on file and every man on Mert has access to all his potentialities, be they good, bad or indifferent. But not us. They don't know when we were born, or where, and even if they did it it wouldn't do them any good, because they haven't got any system covering Mars and Jupiter, the planets at home. Everybody else is catalogued, but not us."

"And just because they believe so thoroughly in their own astrology they've gotten used to the idea that a man is what his horoscope says he is."

"But us? What are we? They haven't the vaguest idea, and it scares hell out of them. The only thing they can do is check with one of the branches, what they call Horary Astrology, and make a horoscope of the day we landed. Even if that tells them nothing about us in particular at least it tells them, or so they believe, all

about our mission to Mert. Because the moment our ship touched the ground was the birth date of our business here."

He paused and regarded Travis with woeful sympathy.

"With us, luckily, it was all right. The Mapping Command just happened to hit here on a good day. But you? Trav, old buddy, for once you came just too damn fast—"

"Oh my God," Travis breathed. "We landed on a bad day."

"Bad?" Horton sighed. "Man, it's *terrible*."

"You see," Horton said as they drove into the town, "not a soul on the streets. This is not only a bad day, this is one for the books. To-morrow, you see, there is an eclipse. And to these people there is nothing more frightening than an eclipse. During the entire week preceding one they won't do a darn thing. No business, no weddings, no anything. The height of it will be reached about tomorrow noon. Their moon—which is a tiny little thing not much bigger than our first space station—is called Felda. It is very important in their astrology. And for all practical purposes the eclipse is already in force. I knew you were riding in down the base so I checked it out. It not only applies to you, other things cinch it."

He pulled a coarse sheet of paper from his pocket and read from it in a wishful voice: "With Huck, planet of necessity, transiting the 12th house of endings and things hidden, squaring Bonken, planet of gain, in the ninth house of travellers and distant places, it is unquestionable that the visit of these—uh—persons bodes ill for Mert. If further proof is needed, one need only examine the position of Diomed, which is conjunct Huck, and closely square to Lyndal, in the third house of commerce, etc, etc. You see what I mean? On top of this yet an eclipse. Trav, you haven't got a prayer. If only you hadn't been so close. Two days from now would have been great. Once the eclipse ends—"

"Well, listen," Travis said desperately, "couldn't we just see the guy?"

"Take my advice. Don't. He has expressed alarm at the thought that you might come near him. Also his guards are armed with blunderbusses. They may be a riot to look at, but those boys can shoot, believe me. Give you a contract? Trav, he wouldn't give you a broom to sweep out his cellar."

At that moment they drew up before an enormous marble building vaguely reminiscent of a Theban palace. It turned out to be the local hotel. Horton stopped on the threshold and handed them two of the tiny Langkits, the little black memory banks in which the language of Mert had been transcribed for their use by the Mapping Command. Travis slipped his automatically into position behind his ear, but he felt no need to know the language. This one was going to be tough. He glanced at Dahlinger. The kid was wearing a stunned expression, too dulled even to notice the pantalooned customer—first Merts they'd seen—eyeing them fearfully from behind pillars as they passed.

Smell that gold, Travis remembered wistfully. Then, smell those generators. Oh, he thought sinkingly, smell those generators. They went silently on up to the room.

Travis stopped at the door as a thought struck him.

"Listen," he said cautiously, taking Horton by the arm, "haven't you thought of this? Why don't we just take off and start all over, orbit around for a couple of days, pick a good hour, and then come back down. That way we'll be starting all—"

But Horton was gazing at him reproachfully.

"They have a word for that, Trav," he said ominously, "they call it *vetching*. Worst crime a man can commit. Attempt to evade his stars. Equivalent almost to falsifying a horoscope. No siree, boy, for that they burn you very slowly. The first horoscope stands. All your subsequent actions, according to them, date from the original. You'll just be bearing out the first diagnosis. You'll be a vetcher."

"Um," Travis said. "If they feel that way, why the heck do they even let us stay?"

"Shows you the way the system works. This is a bad day for everything. Coming as well as going. They'd never think of asking you to start a trip on a day like this. No matter who you are."

Travis collapsed into an old, vaguely Chippendale chair. His position was not that of a man sitting, it was that of a man dropped from a great height.

"Well," Horton said. "So it goes. And listen, Trav, there was nothing I could do."

"Sure, Hort."

"I just want you to know I'm sorry. I know they've been kickin' you around lately, and don't think I don't feel I owe you something. After all, if you hadn't—"

"Easy," Travis said, glancing at Dahlinger. But the kid's ears perked.

"Well," H o r t o n murmured, "just so's you know. Anyways I still got faith in you. And Unico will be in the same boat. If they get here tonight. So think about it. Let me see the old Pat Travis. Your luck has to change sometime."

He clenched a fist, then left.

Travis sat for a long while in the chair. Dahlinger muttered something very bitter about luck. Travis thought of telling him that it was not luck that had put them so close to Mert, but a very grim and expensive liaison with a ferociously ugly Mapping Command secretary at Aldebaran. She had told him that there was a ship in this area. But this news was not for Dahlinger's ears. And neither did he think it wise to explain to Dahlinger the thing he had done for Horton some years ago. Young Dolly was not yet ripe. Travis sighed and looked around for a bed. To his amusement he noted a four poster in the adjoining room. He went in and lay

down.

Gradually the dullness began to wear off. There was a resiliency in Travis unequalled, some said, by spring steel. He began to ponder ways and means.

There was always a way. There had to be a way. Somewhere in the customs of this planet there was a key—but he did not have the time. Unico would be in tonight, others would be down before the week was out. And the one to land in two days, on the *good* day, would get the contract.

He twisted on the bed. Luck, luck, the hell with luck. If you were born with sense you were lucky and if a meteor fell on you, you were unlucky, but most of the rest of it was even from there on out. So if the legend was to continue....

He became gradually aware of the clock in the ceiling.

In the ceiling?

He stared at it. The symbols and the time meant nothing, but the clock was embedded flat in the ceiling above the bed, facing directly down.

He pondered that for a moment. Then he exploded with laughter. By jing, of course. They would have to know what time the baby was conceived. So all over Mert, in thousands of homes, there were clocks in the bedrooms, clocks in the ceilings, and wives peering anxiously upward murmured sweetly in their husbands' ears: 4:17, darling, 4:17 and a half....

The roar of his mirth brought Dolly floundering in from the other room. Travis sprang from the bed.

"Listen, son," he bellowed, "luck be damned! You get back to the ship. Get Mapping Command to let you look at its files, find out everything you can about Mert. There's a key somewhere, boy, there's an out in there someplace, if we look hard enough. Luck! Hah! Work, boy, work, there's a key!"

He shooed Dahlinger out of the room. The young man left dazedly, but he had caught some of Travis' enthusiasm. Travis turned back to the bed feeling unreasonably optimistic. No way out, eh? Well by jingo, old Pat Travis would ride again, he could feel it in his bones.

A few moments later he had another feeling in his bones. This one was much less delightful. He was pacing past a heavy drapery when something very hard and moving very fast struck him on the head.

The first thing Travis saw when he awoke was, unmistakably, the behind of a young woman.

His head was lying flat on the floor and the girl was sitting next to him, her back toward him very close to his face. He stared at it for a long while without thinking. The pain in his head was enormous, and he was not used to pain, not any kind of pain. The whiskey men drank nowadays left no hangovers, and for a normal headache there were instantaneously acting pills, so Travis on the floor was

unused to pain. And though he was by nature a courageous man it took him a while to be able to think at all, much less clearly.

Eventually he realized that he was lying on a very hard floor. His arms and legs were tightly bound. He investigated the floor. It was brick. It was wet. The dark ceiling dripped water in the flickering light from some source beyond the girl. The brick, the dripping water, the girl, all combined to make it completely unbelievable. If it wasn't for the pain he would have rolled over and gone to sleep. But the pain. Yes the pain. He closed his eyes and lay still, hurting.

When he opened his eyes again he was better. By jing, this was ridiculous. Not a full day yet on Mert and in addition to his other troubles, now this. He did not feel alarmed, only downright angry. This business of the flickering light and being tied hand and foot was too impossible to be dangerous. He grunted feebly at the back of the girl.

"Ho," he said. "Now what in the sweet name of Billy H. Culpepper is this?"

The girl turned and looked down at him. She swiveled around on her hips and a rag-bound foot kicked him unconcernedly in the side. For the first time he saw the other two men behind her. There were two of them. The look of them was ridiculous.

The girl said something. It was a moment before he realized she was speaking in Mert, which he had to translate out of the Langkit behind his ear.

"The scourge awakes," one of the men said.

"A joy. It was my thought that in the conjunction was done perhaps murder."

"Poot. One overworries. And if death comes to this one, observe, will the money be paid? Of a surety. But this is bizarre."

"Truly bizarre," the girl nodded. Then to make her point, "also curious, unique, unusual. My thought: from what land he comes?"

"The cloth is rare," one of the men said, "observe with tight eyes the object on his wrist. A many-symboled engine—"

"*My* engine," the girl said positively. She reached down for his watch.

Travis jerked back. "Lay off there," he bawled in English, "you hipless—" The girl recoiled. He could not see her face but her tone was puzzled.

"What language is this? He speaks with liquid."

The larger of the two men arose and came over to him.

"Speak again scourge. But first empty the mouth."

Travis glared at the man's feet, which were wrapped in dirty cloth and smelt like the breezes blowing softly over fresh manure.

"Speak again? Speak again? Untie my hands, you maggoty slob, and I'll speak your bloody—" he went on at great length, but the man ignored him.

"Truly, he speaks as with a full mouth. But this is not Bilken talk."

"Nor is he, of clarity and also profundity, a hill man," the girl observed.

"Poot. Pootpoot," the young man stuttered, "the light! He is of *Them*!"

It took the other two a moment to understand what he meant, but Travis caught on immediately. May the Saints preserve us, he thought, they figured I was from Mert. He chuckled happily to himself. A natural mistake. Only one Earthman on this whole blinking planet, puts up at a good hotel, best in town, these boys put the snatch on me thinking I'm a visiting VIP, loaded, have no idea I'm just poor common trash like the rest of us Earthmen. Haw! His face split in a wide grin. He gathered his words from the Langkit and began to speak in Mert.

"Exactly, friends. With clarity one sees that you have been misled. I am not of Mert. I am from a far world, come here to deal with your Senate in peace. Untie me, then, and let us erase this sad but eraseable mistake with a good handshake all around, and a speedy farewell."

It did not have the effect he desired. The girl stepped back from him, a dark frown on her face, and the large man above him spoke mournfully.

"Where now is the ransom?"

"And the risk," the girl said. "Was not there great risk?"

"Unhappily," the tall man observed. "One risks. One should be repaid. It is in the nature of things that one is repaid."

"Well now, boys," Travis put in from the floor, "you see it yourselves. I'm flat as a—" he paused. Apparently the Merts had no word for pancake. "My pockets are—windy. No money is held therein."

"Still," the tall man mused absently, "this must have friends. On the great ships lie things of value. Doubt?"

"Not," the girl said firmly. "But I see over the hills coming a problem."

"How does it appear?"

"In the shape of disposal. See thee. Such as will come from the great ships, of value though it be, can it not be clarifiably identified by such pootian authorities as presently seek our intestines?"

"Ha!" the tall man snorted in anger. "So. Truth shapes itself."

"Will we not, then," continued the girl, "risk sunlight on our intestines in pursuing this affair?"

"We will," the young man spoke up emphatically. "We will of inevitability. Navel. Our risk is unpaid. So passes the cloud."

"But in freedom for this," the girl warily indicated Travis, "lies risk in great measure. Which way lie his ribs? Can we with profit slice his binds? He is of Them. What coils in his head? What strikes?"

They were all silent. Travis, having caught but not deciphered most of the

conversation, glanced quickly from face to face. The girl had backed out into the light and he could see her now clearly, and his mouth fell open. She was thickly coated with dirt but she was absolutely beautiful. The features were perfect, lovely, the mouth was promising and full. Under the ragged skirt and the torn sooty blouse roamed surfaces of imaginable perfection. He had difficulty getting back to the question at hand. All the while he was thinking other voices inside him were whispering. "By jing, by jing, she's absolutely...."

The two men were completely unlike. One was huge, from this angle he was enormous. He had what looked like a dirty scarf on his head, madonna-like, which would have been ridiculous except for the mountainous shoulders below it and the glittering knife stuck in his wide leather belt. The shaft of the knife flickered wickedly in the light. It was the only clean thing about him.

The other man was young, probably still in his teens. Curly-haired and blond and much cleaner than the other two, with a softness in his face the others lacked. But in his belt he carried what appeared to be—what was, a well-oiled and yawning barreled blunderbuss.

So they sat for a long moment of silence. He had time to observe that what they were sitting in was in all likelihood a sewer. It ran off into darkness but there was a dim light in the distance and other voices far away, and he gathered that this was not all of the—gang—that had abducted him. But it was beginning to penetrate, now, as he began to understand their words, that they were unhappy about letting him go. He was about to argue the point when the big man stepped suddenly forward and knelt beside him. He shut out the light, Travis could not see. The last thing he heard was the big man grunting as he threw the blow, like a rooting pig.

When he awoke this time the pain had moved over to the side of his neck. There was no light at all and he lay wearily for a long while in the blackness. He had no idea how much time had passed. He could tell from the brick wet below him that he was still in the sewer, or at least some other part of it, and, considering the last turn of the conversation, he thought he could call himself lucky to be alive.

But as his strength returned so did his anger. He began to struggle with his bonds. There was still the problem of the contract. He regarded that bitterly. He could just possibly die down here, but his main worry was still the contract. Allspace would be proud of him—but Allspace might never know.

He did nothing with the bonds, which he discovered unhappily were raw leather thongs. Eventually he saw a light coming down the corridor. He saw with a thrill of real pleasure that it was the girl. The young man was tagging along behind her but the big man was absent. The girl knelt down by him and regarded him quizically.

"Do you possess pain?"

"Maiden, I possess and possess unto the limits of capacity."

"My thought is sorrow. But this passes. Consider: your blood remains wet."

Travis caught her meaning. He swore feebly.

"It was very nearly let dry," the girl said. "But solutions conjoined. It was noted at the last, even as the blade descended, that such friends as yours could no doubt barter for Mertian coin, untraceable, thus restoring your value."

"Clever, clever. Oh, clever," Travis said drily.

To his surprise, the girl blushed.

"Overgracious. Overkind. Speed thanks awry of this windy head, aim at yon Lappy"—she indicated the boy who stood smiling shyly behind her—"it was he who thought you alive, he my brother."

"Ah," Travis said. "Well, bless you, boy." He nodded at the boy, who very nearly collapsed with embarrassment. Travis wondered about this 'brother' bit. Brother in crime? The Langkit did not clarify. But the girl turned back on him a smile as glowing as a tiny nova. He gazed cheerfully back.

"Tude and the others sit now composing your note. A matter of weight, confounded in darkness." She lowered her eyes becomingly. "Few of us," she apologized, "have facility in letters."

"A ransom note," Travis growled. "Great Gods and Little—Tude? Who is Tude?"

"The large man who, admittedly hastening before the horse, did plant pain in your head."

"Ah," Travis said, smiling grimly. "We shall presently plow his field—"

"Ho!" the girl cried, agitated. "Speak not in darkness. Tude extends both north and south, a man of dimension as well as choler. He boasts Fors in the tenth in good aspect to Bonken, giving prowess at combat, and Lyndal in the fourth bespeaks a fair ending. Avoid, odd man, foreordained disaster."

In his urge to say a great many things Travis stammered. The girl laid a cool grimy hand lightly on his arm and tried to soothe him.

"With passivity and endurance. The night shall see you free. Tude comes in close moment with the note. Quarrel not at the price, sign, and there will be a conclusion to the matter. We are not retrograde here. As we set our tongues, so lie our deeds."

"Yes, well, all right," Travis grumbled. "But there will come—all right all right. My name shall be inscribed, let your note contain what it will. But I would have speed. There are matters of gravity lying heavily ahead."

The girl cocked her head oddly to one side.

"You sit on points. A rare thing. Lies your horoscope in such confusion that you know not the drift of the coming hours?"

Travis blinked.

"Horoscope?" he said.

"Surely," the girl said, "the astrologers of your planet did preach warning to you of the danger of this day, and whether, in the motions of your system, lay success or failure. Or is it a question of varying interpretations? Did one say you good while the other—"

Travis grinned broadly. Then he sobered. It would quite logically follow that these people, primitive as they were, might not be able to conceive of a land where astrology was not Lord over all. A human trait. But he saw dangerous ground ahead. He began very cautiously and diplomatically to explain himself, saying that while astrology was practiced among his own people, it had not yet become as exact an art as it was on Mert, and only a few had as yet learned to trust it.

The effect on the girl was startling. She seemed for a moment actually terrified when it was finally made clear to her. She abruptly retreated into a corner with her brother and mumbled low frantic sounds. Travis grinned to himself but kept his face stoically calm. But now the girl was out in the light and he could examine her clearly for the first time, and he forgot about astrology entirely.

She was probably in her early twenties. She was dirtier than a well-digger's shoes. She ran with a pack of cutthroats and thieves in what was undoubtedly the lowest possible level of Mertian society. But there was something about her, something Travis responded to very strongly, which he could not define. Possibly something about the set of her hair, which was dark and very long, or perhaps in the mouth—yes the mouth, now observe the mouth—and also maybe in the figure.... But he could not puzzle it out. A girl from the gutter. But—perhaps that was it, there seemed to be no gutter about her. There was real grace in her movements, a definite style in the way she held her head, something gentle and very fine.

Now watch that, Travis boy, he told himself sharply, watch that. A psychological thing, certainly. She probably reminds you of a long forgotten view of your mother.

The girl arose and came back, followed this time by the young man. She had become suddenly and intensely interested in his world—she had apparently taken it for granted that it was exactly like hers, only with space ships—and Travis obliged her by giving a brief sketch of selected subjects: speeds, wonders, what women wore, and so on. Gradually he worked the conversation back around to her, and she began to tell him about herself.

Her name was, euphonically, Navel. This was not particularly startling to Travis. Navel is a pretty word and the people of Mert had chosen another, uglier sound for use when they meant 'belly button,' which was their right. Travis accepted it, and then listened to her story.

She had not always been a criminal, run with the sewer packs. She had come,

as a matter of proud record, from an extremely well-to-do family which featured two Senators, one Horary Astrologer, and a mercantile tycoon—which accounted, Travis thought, for her air of breeding. The great tragedy of her life, however, the thing that had brought her to her present pass, was her abysmally foul horoscope. She had not been a planned baby. Her parents felt great guilt about it, but the deed was done and there was no help for it. She had been born with Huck retrograde in the tenth house, opposing Fors retrograde in the fourth, and so on, and so on, so that even the most amateur astrologer could see right at her birth that she was born for no good, destined for some shameful end.

She told about it with an air of resigned cheerfulness, saying that after all her parents had really done more than could be expected of them. Both with her and her similarly accidental brother Lappy—now *there*, Travis thought, was a careless couple—whose horoscope, she said dolefully, was even worse than her own. The parents had sent her off to school up through the first few years, and had given her a handsome dowry when they disowned her, and they did the same with Lappy a few years later.

But Navel held no bitterness. She was a girl born inevitably for trouble—her horoscope forecast that she would be a shame to her parents, would spend much of her life in obscure, dangerous places, and would reflect no credit on anyone who befriended her. So, for a child like this, what reasonable citizen would waste time and money and love, when it was certain beforehand that the child grown up would be as likely as not to end up a murderess? No, the schools were reserved for the children of promise, as were the jobs and the parties and the respect later on. The only logical course, the habitual custom, was for the parents to disown their evilly aspected children, hoping only that such tragedies as lay in the future would not be too severe, and at least would not be connected with the family name.

And Navel was not bitter. But there was only one place for her, following her exile from her parents' home. A career in business was of course impossible. Prospective employers took one look at your horoscope and—zoom, the door. The only work she could find was menial in the extreme—dish-washing, street cleaning, and so on. So she turned, and Lappy turned, as thousands of their ill-starred kind had turned before them for generations, to the wild gangs of the sewers.

And it was not nearly so bad as it might have seemed. The sewer gangs were composed of thousands of people just like herself, homeless, cast out, and they came from all levels of society to found a society of their own. They offered each other what none of them could have found anywhere else on Mert: appreciation, companionship, and even if life in the sewers was filthy, it was also tolerable, and many even married and had children—the luckiest of whom quickly disowned

their parents and were adopted by wealthy families.

But the thing which impressed Travis most of all was that none of these people were bitter at their fate. Navel could not recall ever hearing of any organized attempt at rebellion. Indeed, most of the sewer people believed more strongly in the astrology of Mert than did the business men on the outside. For each day every one of them could look at the dirt of himself, at the disease of his surroundings, and could see that the message of his horoscope was true: he was born to no good end. And since it had been drummed into these people from their earliest childhood that only the worst could be expected of them, they gave in, quite humanly, to the predictions, and went philosophically forth to live up to them. They watched the daily horoscopes intently for the Bad Days, realizing that what was bad for the normal people must be a field day for themselves, and they issued out of the sewers periodically on binges of robbery, kidnapping, and worse. In this way they lived up to the promise of their stars, fulfilled themselves, and also managed to eat. And few if any ever questioned the justice of their position.

Travis sat listening, stunned. For a long while the contract and how to get out of here and all the rest of it was forgotten. He sat watching the girl and her shy brother as they spoke self-consciously to him, and began to understand what they must be feeling. Travis was from outside the sewers, he had stayed at the grand hotel—his horoscope, whether he believed it or not, must be very fine. And so they did him unconscious homage, much in the manner of low caste Hindus speaking to a Bramin. It was unnerving.

Gradually the boy Lappy began to speak also, and Travis realized with surprise that the boy was in many ways remarkable. As Navel's brother—Navel, Travis gathered with a twinge of deep regret, was the big Tude's 'friend', and Tude was the leader of this particular gang—young Lappy had a restful position. He was kept out of most of the rough work end allowed to pursue what he shamelessly called his 'studies', and he guessed proudly that he must have stolen nearly every book in the Consul's library. His particular hobbies, it turned out, were math and physics. He had a startling command of both, and some of the questions he asked Travis were embarrassing. But the boy was leaning forward, breathlessly drinking in the answers, when Tude came back.

The big man loomed over them suddenly on his quiet rag-bound feet, frightening the boy and causing the girl to flinch. He made a number of singularly impolite remarks, but Travis said nothing and bided his time. He regarded the big man with patient joy, considering with delight such bloodthirsty effects as judo could produce on this one—Fors and Bonken be damned—if they ever untied his hands.

Eventually, unable to get a rise out of him, the big man shoved a paper down before his nose and told him to sign it. He pulled out that wickedly clean knife and

freed Travis' hand just enough for him to move his wrist. Hoping for the best, Travis signed. Tude chuckled, said something nastily to the girl, the girl said something chilling in return, and the big man cuffed her playfully on the shoulder. Then he lumbered away.

Travis sat glaring after him. The contract, the need to escape flooded back into his mind. The eclipse might be ending even now. Unico would already be here, probably one or two others as well. And this ransom business might take a week. He swore to himself. Pat Travis, the terror of the skies, held captive by a bunch of third rate musical comedy pirates while millions lay in wait in the city above. And oh my Lord, he thought, stricken, what will people say when they hear—he had to get out.

He glanced cautiously at the girl and the boy, who were gazing at him ingenuously. He saw instantly that the way, if there was a way, lay through them. But the plan had not yet formed when the boy leaned forward and spoke.

"I have an odd thing in my head," Lappy said bashfully, "that nevertheless radiates joy to my mind. In my reading I have seen things leap together from many books, forming a whole, and the whole is rare. Can you, in your wisdom, confirm or deny what I have seen? It is this—"

He spoke a short series of sentences. Navel tried to shush him, embarrassed, but he doggedly went on. And Travis, stricken, found himself suddenly paying close attention.

For the words Lappy said, with minor variations, were Isaac Newton's Laws of Motion.

"There are the seven planets," Navel was saying gravely, "and the two lights—that is, the sun and the moon. The first planet, that nearest the sun, is called Rym. Rym is the planet of intellect, of the ordinary mind. Second, is Lyndal, the planet of love, beauty, parties, marriage, and things of a gentle nature. Third is Fors, planet of action, strife. Fourth is Bonken, planet of beneficence, of gain, money, health. Next comes Huck, orb of necessity, the Greater Infortune, which brings men most trouble of all. Then Weepen, planet of illusion, of dreamers and poets and, poorly aspected, liars and cheats. And finally there is Sharb, planet of genius, of sudden cataclysms."

"I see," Travis murmured.

"But it is not only these planets and their aspects which is important, it is also to be considered such houses and signs as through which these planets transit...."

She went on, but Travis was having difficulty following her. He could not help but return to Newton's Laws. It was incredible. Here on this backward planet, mired in an era roughly equivalent to the time of the Renaissance, an event was taking place almost exactly at the same time as it had happened, long ago, on

Earth. It had been Isaac Newton, then. It was, incredibly, this frail young man named Lappy now. For unless Travis was greatly mistaken, Navel's kid brother was an authentic genius. And such a genius as comes once in a hundred years.

So, naturally, Lappy would have to come home with Travis. The boy was hardly college age as yet. Sent to school by Allspace, given a place in the great Allspace laboratories at Aldebaran, young Lappy might eventually make the loss of the contract at Mert seem puny in comparison to the things that head of his could produce. For Lappy was a natural resource, just as certainly as any mine on Mert, and since the advent of Earth science meant Mert would no longer be needing him, Lappy could go along with Travis and still leave him a clear conscience.

But the question still remained: how? He could not even get himself out, yet, let alone Lappy. And the girl. What about the girl?

He brooded, groping for an out. But in the meanwhile he listened while the girl outlined Mert's system of astrology. He had realized finally that the key to the business lay there. Astrology was these people's most powerful motivating force. If he could somehow turn it to his advantage—He listened to the girl. And eventually found his plan.

"Ho!" he said abruptly. Startled, the girl stared at him.

"Lightning in the brain," Travis grinned, "solutions effervesce. Attend. Of surety, are not *places* on Mert also ruled by the stars? Is it not true that towns and villages do also have horoscopes?"

Navel blinked.

"Why, see thee, it is in the nature of things, odd man, that all matter is governed by the planets. How else come explanations, for example, of natural catastrophes, fires, plagues, which affect whole cities and not others? And consider war, does not one country win, and the other lose? Of a surety different aspects obtain...."

"Joy then," Travis said. "But do further observe. Is it not so, in your astrology, that a man's horoscope may often conflict with that of the place wherein he dwells? Is it not so that, often, a man is promised greater success in other regions, where the ruling stars more closely and friendlily conjoin his own?"

"Your mind leaps obstacles and homes to the truth," Navel said approvingly. "Many times has it been made clear that a man's fortune lies best in places ruled by his Ascendant, as witness, for example, those who are advised to take to the sea, or to southern lands...."

"Intoxication!" Travis cried out happily, "then is our goal made known. Consider: from your poor natal horoscope, in this city, this land, no fortune arises. You doom yourself, with Lappy, by remaining here. But what business is this? Seek you not better times? Could you not go forth to another place, and so become people of gravity, of substance, of moment?"

The girl regarded for a moment, puzzled, then caught his point and shook her head sadly.

"Odd man, without profit. You misconstrue. Such as we, my brother and I, are not condemned by place, but by twistings of the character. My natal Huck, retrograde in the tenth, gives an untrustworthy, criminous person. It would be so here, there, anywhere. My pattern is set. Such travels as you describe are for those who conflict only with place. I, and my brother, it is our sad fortune to conflict with *all*."

"But this is the core," Travis insisted. "The conflict is with *Mert*! Consider, such travail as is yours stems from the radiations of Huck, of Weepen, of Scharb. But should you remove yourself beyond their reach, across great vastnesses of space to where other planets subtend—and in their alien radiation extinguish and nullify those of Huck—what fortune comes then? What rises, what leaps in joy?"

The girl sat speechless, staring at Travis with great soft eyes. The boy Lappy, who until that moment had been grinning happily over the news that his laws were true, suddenly understood what Travis was saying and let his mouth fall open.

But the girl sat without expression. Then, to Travis' dismay, a slow dark look of disgust came over her face.

"This," she said ominously, "this smacks of *vetching*."

The word fell like a sudden fog. Lappy, who had begun to smile, cut it sharply off. Travis, remembering what vetching meant to these people, gathered his forces.

"Woman," he said bitingly, "you speak in offense, but with patience and kindness I heal your insult. I control my choler, but my blood flows hot, therefore fasten your tongue. Tell me not that I have overvalued you, for your brain is clear, your courage thick. Wherefore speak of vetch? What vetch is there in travel? He vetches who leaves a certainty for another certainty, who attempts to avoid his starry fate. But you go from a certain end to an end not certain at all, to places of dark mystery, of grim foreboding. It may be that you perish, or pain in the extreme, as well as gain fortune. The end is not clear. This then is not vetching. Now retreat your words, and reply to me as one does to a friend, a companion, one who seeks your good."

He sat tautly while the girl thought it out. Eventually she dropped her eyes in submission and he sighed inwardly with relief. It was accomplished. He would have to shore it up perhaps with a little elaboration, but it was accomplished.

Ten minutes later he was standing free and unbound in the passageway. It was just barely in time. Down the round dark tunnel two men came.

Navel stopped gingerly over the bodies and gazed at Travis with awestruck admiration.

"A rare skill," she murmured, "they did flip and gyrate as dry leaves in the wind."

"Observe then," Travis said ominously, inspecting meanwhile the long slash down his arm with which Tude had nearly gotten him "and learn. And in the future receive my words with planetary respect."

"I will."

"And I," added Lappy, shaken.

"Fair. Bright. Now attend. How lies the path?"

"Through more such as these, I fear. This place in which we trouble lies at a dead end. We must proceed through great halls where many sit waiting, ere we arrive at the light."

"No other way? Think now."

"None."

Travis sighed.

"And they talk about luck. Well boy," he turned to Lappy, "give me your blunderbuss. Obtain that one's knife"—he indicated the sleeping Tude—"and let us carve our way out into the sunshine."

But as it turned out, the getting free was much easier than he had anticipated. There was only one band, the girl's own, between them and the opening, and these had fortunately just finished their evening meal when Travis stalked, black, gaunt and murderous, out of the tunnel into their large round room. Part of it was the surprise, part of it was the sudden knowledge that big Tude and the other man had already tried to stop him, but most of it was simply the look of him. He was infinitely ready. They were not, had no reason to be, and they took it automatically for granted that a man this confident must have the stars behind him. They regarded him thoughtfully as he went on by. No one moved. They were a philosophical people. When he had gone, taking the boy and girl with him, they discussed it thoroughly.

Out under the sky at last it was pitch black and the stars were shining. Travis realized that he had been in the sewer almost a full 24 hours. That meant that the eclipse was done, tomorrow would be a good day. There was not much time.

He commandeered the first carriage to come by, routing three elegantly dressed but unwarlike young men who fled in terror. He saw with relief that they thought him only another sewer rat, for if word of an Earthman robbing the local citizens ever got out there would be hell to pay, and in addition to his other troubles he could not abide that. He told Navel to head for the field where old 29 rested. Thoroughly bushed and beginning now to feel a woeful hunger, he sat back to brood.

At the ship young Trippe greeted him with haggard astonishment. He jumped forward joyfully.

"Trav! By jig, Trav, I thought we'd lost you. Old Dolly's over at the local

police sta—" He stopped abruptly and stood slack-jawed as Navel and Lappy clambered fearfully through the lock. Travis glanced back. No spectators. Good.

"Now what in the sweet silly name—" Trippe began, but Travis stopped him.

"Russ, be a good kid. See if you can get me something to eat. Haven't had a bite in 24 hours."

"Sure, Trav, sure, only—what's with the Lower Depths here?"

"You might show them the showers," Travis grinned. "Or at least turn on the air conditioning. But listen, anything new on the contract?"

Trippe's face fell. "Not a thing. Even worse. Let me tell you. But ho, the food." He dashed off. Travis collapsed into a chair. A few moments later Trippe came back bearing food, but his eyes by now had begun to penetrate the dirt of the girl, and he stood watching her, bemused. Then suddenly he began to look happier than he had in several days. Travis told him briefly what had happened in the sewer, also about the brains of Lappy. Trippe was impressed. But he continued to regard the girl.

"Well," Travis said, munching, "fill me in on what's been going on. The eclipse come off?"

Trippe jerked. He focussed on Travis unhappily.

"Oh boy, did it come off. Wait'll you hear. Listen, you know the way it is now, I think they're going to kick *all* Earthmen off this planet. The M.C. says we may have to leave and come back a hundred years from now. Not anybody going to get a contract now."

"What happened?"

"Well, you wouldn't believe it. You have to understand these people's astrology. You know the little moon these people have—Felda, they call it—it's only a tiny thing, really only a few hundred yards wide. Well, when the Mapping Command first came by here they set down on that Moon and set up a listening post before landing, you know, the way they always do, to size up the situation through telescopes, radio, all that. Mostly they just orbit but this time they landed. God knows why. And took off again, naturally, throwing in the star drive. So today the eclipse comes off all right, but it comes off late."

He could not help smiling.

"You see what happened. A star drive is a hell of a force. It altered the orbit of the moon. Not enough to make any real difference, just a few hours a year, only minutes a day, but boy, you want to hear these people howl. And I guess you can see their point. Every movement that damn moon makes is important to them, they know where it should be to the inch. And now not only is it slightly off course, but so is every ephemeris printed on Mert. And they have them printed up, I un-

derstand, for the next thousand years. Which runs into money. We offered to pay, of course, but paying isn't going to help. It seems we've also messed up interpretations, predictions, the whole doggone philosophy. Oh it's a real ding dong. But contract? Not in a million years."

Travis sighed. That seemed to put the cap on it, all right. After all, when you start pushing people's moons around, where will it end? He brooded, his appetite gone. But he made a last effort.

"Did you discover anything at all we could use?"

"Nope. Not a thing. I finally figured the only thing to do was work on the astrology end of it, you know, maybe we could argue about interpretations. These people love to argue about interpretations. But no soap. It's too complicated. To learn enough even to argue would take a couple of years. And besides Unico is here, and also Randall, and they all have the same idea. Anyway, I don't think it would work. The eclipse is too definite. You can't argue the eclipse."

"Well," Travis said with approval, "you were on the right track. You did what you could. At least we got *something* out of the deal." He indicated Lappy, who was at that moment fervidly examining the interior of the viewscreen.

Trippe nodded, but his eyes were on Navel.

"By jing," he said suddenly, "your luck holds good, no matter what. I never saw the beat of it—"

"Luck?" Travis fumed, "what luck?"

"Look, Trav, what else could you call it? You fall in a sewer, you come up with Isaac Newton and a gorgeous doll. It's uncanny, that's what it is, uncanny."

Travis lapsed into wordless musing on Navel, planets, people.

Come to think of it, he thought, it *is* uncanny.

At that moment there was a pounding on the lock. Travis quickly shooed Navel and Lappy into hiding, then cautiously went to the door. He relaxed. It was Ed Horton.

"I saw you come back, Trav. Mighty glad. But I knew you'd make it. Old Pat Travis always comes through. Aint that right, Pat?"

He tottered in the doorway. Travis caught the sweet scent of strong brew. He stepped forward to help him but Horton stood up grandly, waving him away. His mouth creased in an amiable grin.

"Diomed," he announced proudly, "is a nine planet system."

After which he fell backwards out of the door.

Trav ran to the door, stared down into the dark. Horton sat upright at the foot of the ladder.

"Sall right ole buddy. Dint mean to stay. Only thought you'd like to know natural sci-yen-tiffy fack. Diomed is nine plan' system."

He rose on wobbly but cheerful legs.

"No favoritism there, hey? Science. I just tell you a fack, you take it from there. No favoritism tall."

He lurched away mumbling cheerily, his obligation fulfilled.

Travis stared after him, wheels turning in his brain. Fack? A nine planet system. It jelled slowly, then broke.

Nine planets.

The key.

He turned slowly on Trippe, his eyes swivelling like twin dark cannon.

"What's he say?" Trippe said, half-smiling. "Boy, he was sure—"

"Did you know this was a nine planet system?"

"Why ... sure, Trav. But what—"

"And did you take the trouble to examine their astrology?"

"Certainly. What the heck—"

"And you call it luck." Travis sighed, then broke into a radiant grin. "Why there's your bloomin' answer, you sad silly dreamin'—there's your bloomin' answer!" He sailed over to a drawer, grabbed a batch of fresh contracts, then flashed toward the door.

"Hold the fort," he bawled over his shoulder, "break out a big bottle and small glasses! We got a contract, lad, we got a contract!"

He vanished triumphantly into the night.

Old 29 was homing. Travis felt the great soft peace of deep space close over him. All was right with the world. A clean and sparkling Navel, well-bathed now and almost frighteningly beautiful, sat worshipfully at his feet dressed in a pair of Dahlinger's pajamas. Both Trippe and Dahlinger were regarding him with wonder and delight, and as he sat gazing down at them fondly he recalled with pleasure the outraged faces of the men from Unico, that robber outfit.

"Pat Travis," he chuckled, patting the fat contract in his pocket, "the luckless Pat Travis rides again." He turned an eye on the staring Trippe.

"My boy," he said paternally, "speaks me no speaks about luck, from this day forth. All the material was in your hands, there was no luck involved. All you had to do was use it."

"But Trav, I still don't get it. I've been thinkin' all night, all the while you were gone...."

"The planet Pluto," Travis said evenly, "was discovered by Earthmen, finally, in the year 1930. At that time we were approximately 300 years ahead, technologically, of the people of Mert. A similar case exists for Neptune, which was not discovered, although adequate telescopes had long been in use, until 1846."

He paused and gazed happily around. "Does the light dawn?"

"Holy cow!"

"Exactly. Diomed is a nine planet system. For which 'fack' thank old Ed Horton, who returned a favor done many years ago. Luck? Only if doing favors for people is lucky. Which I suppose you could make a case for. But in the astrology of Diomed III—an astrology I took great pains to understand—how many planets are considered? Let us examine. Rym, Fors, Lyndal, Bonken, Huck, Weepen, and Sharb. And then there are also the two 'lights,' that is, the sun and the moon. But how many *planets* are there? Counting Mert as one, add them up. It comes out eight. Not nine. Eight. But Diomed is a nine planet system. Bless Ed Horton. What happened to the missing planet?"

Dahlinger whooped. "They didn't know they had one!"

Travis grinned. "With surety. They didn't know it existed. If they had their astrology would certainly have shown it. So it had obviously, like our own Pluto at a similar time, never been discovered."

He paused once again while Dahlinger and Trippe regarded him with delight.

"And you," Trippe said, "you showed them where it was."

Travis clucked. "I did not. For one thing, I didn't know where it was. I simply told him, very regretfully, that there *was* one, but the situation being what it was, I couldn't allow him to use our telescopes to plot its orbit. Unless, you see, there existed a concrete agreement between us.

"I added that I had heard that Earthmen would shortly be leaving his planet. Very unhappily I told him he could not expect to produce a telescope of the necessary power within at least the next hundred years. And even then, it would be many more years before they actually found it. I was very sorry about the whole business, so I just thought I'd drop by to offer my regrets."

"And he leaped at the chance."

"No. You rush to conclusions. He did not leap at the chance. He sat very quietly thinking about it. It was a gruesome sight. I could sympathize with him. On the one hand he had us, the unknown, moon-moving Us, with which he wanted no traffic whatever. But on the other side there was the knowledge of that planet moving all unwatched out in the black, casting down its radiations, be they harmful or good, and no way to know in what sign the thing was, or what house, or what effect it would have on him, *was having* on him, even as he sat there. Oh he struggled, but I knew I had him. He signed the contract. I think I may say, that it is among the most liberal contracts we have ever signed."

There was a long moment of silence in the ship. The young men sat grinning foolishly.

"So let me hear no more about luck," said Travis firmly. "In the future, sons, put your shoulders to the wheel...."

But the attention of the two was already wandering. They were both beginning to gaze once more upon the lovely Navel, who was quite shyly but very womanly gazing back. He saw Trippe look at Dahlinger, Dahlinger glare at Trippe, their hackles rising. He looked down at Navel in alarm.

Born to cause trouble?

Oh no, he thought abruptly, seeing a whole new world beginning to open up, oh no, oh no....

CROSSROADS OF DESTINY

I still have the dollar bill. It's in my box at the bank, and I think that's where it will stay. I simply won't destroy it, but I can think of nobody to whom I'd be willing to show it—certainly nobody at the college, my History Department colleagues least of all. Merely to tell the story would brand me irredeemably as a crackpot, but crackpots are tolerated, even on college faculties. It's only when they begin producing physical evidence that they get themselves actively resented.

When I went into the club-car for a nightcap before going back to my compartment to turn in, there were five men there, sitting together.

One was an Army officer, with the insignia and badges of a Staff Intelligence colonel. Next to him was a man of about my own age, with sandy hair and a bony, Scottish looking face, who sat staring silently into a highball which he held in both hands. Across the aisle, an elderly man, who could have been a lawyer or a banker, was smoking a cigar over a glass of port, and beside him sat a plump and slightly too well groomed individual who had a tall colorless drink, probably gin-and-tonic. The fifth man, separated from him by a vacant chair, seemed to be dividing his attention between a book on his lap and the conversation, in which he was taking no part. I sat down beside the sandy-haired man; as I did so and rang for the waiter, the colonel was saying:

"No, that wouldn't. I can think of a better one. Suppose you have Columbus get his ships from Henry the Seventh of England and sail under the English instead of the Spanish flag. You know, he did try to get English backing, before he went to Spain, but King Henry turned him down. That could be changed."

I pricked up my ears. The period from 1492 to the Revolution is my special field of American history, and I knew, at once, the enormous difference that would have made. It was a moment later that I realized how oddly the colonel had expressed the idea, and by that time the plump man was speaking.

"Yes, that would work," he agreed. "Those kings made decisions, most of the time, on whether or not they had a hangover, or what some court favorite thought." He got out a notebook and pen and scribbled briefly. "I'll hand that to

the planning staff when I get to New York. That's Henry the Seventh, not Henry the Eighth? Right. We'll fix it so that Columbus will catch him when he's in a good humor."

That was too much. I turned to the man beside me.

"What goes on?" I asked. "Has somebody invented a time machine?"

He looked up from the drink he was contemplating and gave me a grin.

"Sounds like it, doesn't it? Why, no; our friend here is getting up a television program. Tell the gentleman about it," he urged the plump man across the aisle.

The waiter arrived at that moment. The plump man, who seemed to need little urging, waited until I had ordered a drink and then began telling me what a positively sensational idea it was.

"We're calling it *Crossroads of Destiny*," he said. "It'll be a series, one half-hour show a week; in each episode, we'll take some historic event and show how history could have been changed if something had happened differently. We dramatize the event up to that point just as it really happened, and then a commentary-voice comes on and announces that this is the Crossroads of Destiny; this is where history could have been completely changed. Then he gives a resumé of what really did happen, and then he says, '*But*—suppose so and so had done this and that, instead of such and such.' Then we pick up the dramatization at that point, only we show it the way it might have happened. Like this thing about Columbus; we'll show how it could have happened, and end with Columbus wading ashore with his sword in one hand and a flag in the other, just like the painting, only it'll be the English flag, and Columbus will shout: 'I take possession of this new land in the name of His Majesty, Henry the Seventh of England!'" He brandished his drink, to the visible consternation of the elderly man beside him. "And then, the sailors all sing *God Save the King*."

"Which wasn't written till about 1745," I couldn't help mentioning.

"Huh?" The plump man looked startled. "Are you sure?" Then he decided that I was, and shrugged. "Well, they can all shout, 'God Save King Henry!' or 'St. George for England!' or something. Then, at the end, we introduce the program guest, some history expert, a real name, and he tells how he thinks history would have been changed if it had happened this way."

The conservatively dressed gentleman beside him wanted to know how long he expected to keep the show running.

"The crossroads will give out before long," he added.

"The sponsor'll give out first," I said. "History is just one damn crossroads after another." I mentioned, in passing, that I taught the subject. "Why, since the beginning of this century, we've had enough of them to keep the show running for a year."

"We have about twenty already written and ready to produce," the plump man said comfortably, "and ideas for twice as many that the planning staff is working on now."

The elderly man accepted that and took another cautious sip of wine.

"What I wonder, though, is whether you can really say that history can be changed."

"Well, of course—" The television man was taken aback; one always seems to be when a basic assumption is questioned. "Of course, we only know what really did happen, but it stands to reason if something had happened differently, the results would have been different, doesn't it?"

"But it seems to me that everything would work out the same in the long run. There'd be some differences at the time, but over the years wouldn't they all cancel out?"

"*Non, non, Monsieur!*" the man with the book, who had been outside the conversation until now, told him earnestly. "Make no mistake; 'istoree can be shange'!"

I looked at him curiously. The accent sounded French, but it wasn't quite right. He was some kind of a foreigner, though; I'd swear that he never bought the clothes he was wearing in this country. The way the suit fitted, and the cut of it, and the shirt-collar, and the necktie. The book he was reading was Langmuir's *Social History of the American People*—not one of my favorites, a bit too much on the doctrinaire side, but what a bookshop clerk would give a foreigner looking for something to explain America.

"What do you think, Professor?" the plump man was asking me.

"It would work out the other way. The differences wouldn't cancel out; they'd accumulate. Say something happened a century ago, to throw a presidential election the other way. You'd get different people at the head of the government, opposite lines of policy taken, and eventually we'd be getting into different wars with different enemies at different times, and different batches of young men killed before they could marry and have families—different people being born or not being born. That would mean different ideas, good or bad, being advanced; different books written; different inventions, and different social and economic problems as a consequence."

"Look, he's only giving himself a century," the colonel added. "Think of the changes if this thing we were discussing, Columbus sailing under the English flag, had happened. Or suppose Leif Ericson had been able to plant a permanent colony in America in the Eleventh Century, or if the Saracens had won the Battle of Tours. Try to imagine the world today if any of those things had happened. One thing you can be sure of—any errors you make in trying to imagine such a world will be on the side of over-conservatism."

The sandy-haired man beside me, who had been using his highball for a crystal ball, must have glimpsed in it what he was looking for. He finished the drink, set the empty glass on the stand-tray beside him, and reached back to push the button.

"I don't think you realize just how good an idea you have, here," he told the plump man abruptly. "If you did, you wouldn't ruin it with such timid and unimaginative treatment."

I thought he'd been staying out of the conversation because it was over his head. Instead, he had been taking the plump man's idea apart, examining all the pieces, and considering what was wrong with it and how it could be improved. The plump man looked startled, and then angry—timid and unimaginative were the last things he'd expected his idea to be called. Then he became uneasy. Maybe this fellow was a typical representative of his lord and master, the faceless abstraction called the Public.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Misplaced emphasis. You shouldn't emphasize the event that could have changed history; you should emphasize the changes that could have been made. You're going to end this show you were talking about with a shot of Columbus wading up to the beach with an English flag, aren't you?"

"Well, that's the logical ending."

"That's the logical beginning," the sandy-haired man contradicted. "And after that, your guest historian comes on; how much time will he be allowed?"

"Well, maybe three or four minutes. We can't cut the dramatization too short—"

"And he'll have to explain, a couple of times, and in words of one syllable, that what we have seen didn't really happen, because if he doesn't, the next morning half the twelve-year-old kids in the country will be rushing wild-eyed into school to slip the teacher the real inside about the discovery of America. By the time he gets that done, he'll be able to mumble a couple of generalities about vast and incalculable effects, and then it'll be time to tell the public about Widgets, the really safe cigarettes, all filter and absolutely free from tobacco."

The waiter arrived at this point, and the sandy-haired man ordered another rye highball. I decided to have another bourbon on the rocks, and the TV impresario said, "Gin-and-tonic," absently, and went into a reverie which lasted until the drinks arrived. Then he came awake again.

"I see what you mean," he said. "Most of the audience would wonder what difference it would have made where Columbus would have gotten his ships, as long as he got them and America got discovered. I can see it would have made a hell of a big difference. But how could it be handled any other way? How could you figure out just what the difference would have been?"

"Well, you need a man who'd know the historical background, and you'd need a man with a powerful creative imagination, who is used to using it inside rigorously defined limits. Don't try to get them both in one; a collaboration would really be better. Then you work from the known situation in Europe and in America in 1492, and decide on the immediate effects. And from that, you have to carry it along, step by step, down to the present. It would be a lot of hard and very exacting work, but the result would be worth it." He took a sip from his glass and added: "Remember, you don't have to prove that the world today would be the way you set it up. All you have to do is make sure that nobody else would be able to prove that it wouldn't."

"Well, how could you present that?"

"As a play, with fictional characters and a plot; time, the present, under the changed conditions. The plot—the reason the coward conquers his fear and becomes a hero, the obstacle to the boy marrying the girl, the reason the innocent man is being persecuted—will have to grow out of this imaginary world you've constructed, and be impossible in our real world. As long as you stick to that, you're all right."

"Sure. I get that." The plump man was excited again; he was about half sold on the idea. "But how will we get the audience to accept it? We're asking them to start with an assumption they know isn't true."

"Maybe it is, in another time-dimension," the colonel suggested. "You can't prove it isn't. For that matter, you can't prove there aren't other time-dimensions."

"Hah, that's it!" the sandy-haired man exclaimed. "World of alternate probability. That takes care of that."

He drank about a third of his highball and sat gazing into the rest of it, in an almost yogic trance. The plump man looked at the colonel in bafflement.

"Maybe this alternate-probability time-dimension stuff means something to you," he said. "Be damned if it does to me."

"Well, as far as we know, we live in a four-dimensional universe," the colonel started.

The elderly man across from him groaned. "Fourth dimension! Good God, are we going to talk about that?"

"It isn't anything to be scared of. You carry an instrument for measuring in the fourth dimension all the time. A watch."

"You mean it's just time? But that isn't—"

"We know of three dimensions of space," the colonel told him, gesturing to indicate them. "We can use them for coordinates to locate things, but we also locate things in time. I wouldn't like to ride on a train or a plane if we didn't. Well, let's call the time we know, the time your watch registers, Time-A. Now, suppose

the entire, infinite extent of Time-A is only an instant in another dimension of time, which we'll call Time-B. The next instant of Time-B is also the entire extent of Time-A, and the next and the next. As in Time-A, different things are happening at different instants. In one of these instants of Time-B, one of the things that's happening is that King Henry the Seventh of England is furnishing ships to Christopher Columbus."

The man with the odd clothes was getting excited again.

"Zees—'ow you say—zees alternate probabeelitay; eet ees a theory zhenerally accept' een zees countree?"

"Got it!" the sandy-haired man said, before anybody could answer. He set his drink on the stand-tray and took a big jackknife out of his pocket, holding it unopened in his hand. "How's this sound?" he asked, and hit the edge of the tray with the back of the knife, *Bong*!

"Crossroads—of—*Destiny*!" he intoned, and hit the edge of the tray again, *Bong*! "This is the year 1959—but not the 1959 of our world, for we are in a world of alternate probability, in another dimension of time; a world parallel to and coexistent with but separate from our own, in which history has been completely altered by a single momentous event." He shifted back to his normal voice.

"Not bad; only twenty-five seconds," the plump man said, looking up from his wrist watch. "And a trained announcer could maybe shave five seconds off that. Yes, something like that, and at the end we'll have another thirty seconds, and we can do without the guest."

"But zees alternate probibeelitay, in anozzer dimension," the stranger was insisting. "Ees zees a concept original weet you?" he asked the colonel.

"Oh, no; that idea's been around for a long time."

"I never heard of it before now," the elderly man said, as though that completely demolished it.

"Zen eet ees zhenerally accept' by zee scienteest'?"

"Umm, no," the sandy-haired man relieved the colonel. "There's absolutely no evidence to support it, and scientists don't accept unsupported assumptions unless they need them to explain something, and they don't need this assumption for anything. Well, it would come in handy to make some of these reports of freak phenomena, like mysterious appearances and disappearances, or flying-object sightings, or reported falls of non-meteoric matter, theoretically respectable. Reports like that usually get the ignore-and-forget treatment, now."

"Zen you believe zat zeese ozzer world of zee alternate probabeelitay, zey exist?"

"No. I don't disbelieve it, either. I've no reason to, one way or another." He studied his drink for a moment, and lowered the level in the glass slightly. "I've

said that once in a while things get reported that look as though such other worlds, in another time-dimension, may exist. There have been whole books published by people who collect stories like that. I must say that academic science isn't very hospitable to them."

"You mean, zings sometimes, 'ow-you-say, leak in from one of zees ozzer worlds? Zat has been known to 'appen?"

"Things have been said to have happened that might, if true, be cases of things leaking through from another time world," the sandy-haired man corrected. "Or leaking away to another time world." He mentioned a few of the more famous cases of unexplained mysteries—the English diplomat in Prussia who vanished in plain sight of a number of people, the ship found completely deserted by her crew, the lifeboats all in place; stories like that. "And there's this rash of alleged sightings of unidentified flying objects. I'd sooner believe that they came from another dimension than from another planet. But, as far as I know, nobody's seriously advanced this other-time-dimension theory to explain them."

"I think the idea's familiar enough, though, that we can use it as an explanation, or pseudo-explanation, for the program," the television man said. "Fact is, we aren't married to this Crossroads title, yet; we could just as easily all it *Fifth Dimension*. That would lead the public, to expect something out of the normal before the show started."

That got the conversation back onto the show, and we talked for some time about it, each of us suggesting possibilities. The stranger even suggested one—that the Civil War had started during the Jackson Administration. Fortunately, nobody else noticed that. Finally, a porter came through and inquired if any of us were getting off at Harrisburg, saying that we would be getting in in five minutes.

The stranger finished his drink hastily and got up, saying that he would have to get his luggage. He told us how much he had enjoyed the conversation, and then followed the porter toward the rear of the train. After he had gone out, the TV man chuckled.

"Was that one an oddball!" he exclaimed. "Where the hell do you suppose he got that suit?"

"It was a tailored suit," the colonel said. "A very good one. And I can't think of any country in the world in which they cut suits just like that. And did you catch his accent?"

"Phony," the television man pronounced. "The French accent of a Greek waiter in a fake French restaurant. In the Bronx."

"Not quite. The pronunciation was all right for French accent, but the cadence, the way the word-sounds were strung together, was German."

The elderly man looked at the colonel keenly. "I see you're Intelligence," he mentioned. "Think he might be somebody up your alley, Colonel?"

The colonel shook his head. "I doubt it. There are agents of unfriendly powers in this country—a lot of them, I'm sorry to have to say. But they don't speak accented English, and they don't dress eccentrically. You know there's an enemy agent in a crowd, pick out the most normally American type in sight and you usually won't have to look further."

The train ground to a stop. A young couple with hand-luggage came in and sat at one end of the car, waiting until other accommodations could be found for them. After a while, it started again. I dallied over my drink, and then got up and excused myself, saying that I wanted to turn in early.

In the next car behind, I met the porter who had come in just before the stop. He looked worried, and after a moment's hesitation, he spoke to me.

"Pardon, sir. The man in the club-car who got off at Harrisburg; did you know him?"

"Never saw him before. Why?"

"He tipped me with a dollar bill when he got off. Later, I looked closely at it. I do not like it."

He showed it to me, and I didn't blame him. It was marked *One Dollar*, and *United States of America*, but outside that there wasn't a thing right about it. One side was gray, all right, but the other side was green. The picture wasn't the right one. And there were a lot of other things about it, some of them absolutely ludicrous. It wasn't counterfeit—it wasn't even an imitation of a United States bill.

And then it hit me, like a bullet in the chest. Not a bill of *our* United States. No wonder he had been so interested in whether our scientists accepted the theory of other time dimensions and other worlds of alternate probability!

On an impulse, I got out two ones and gave them to the porter—perfectly good United States Bank gold-certificates.

"You'd better let me keep this," I said, trying to make it sound the way he'd think a Federal Agent would say it. He took the bills, smiling, and I folded his bill and put it into my vest pocket.

"Thank you, sir," he said. "I have no wish to keep it."

Some part of my mind below the level of consciousness must have taken over and guided me back to the right car and compartment; I didn't realize where I was going till I put on the light and recognized my own luggage. Then I sat down, as dizzy as though the two drinks I had had, had been a dozen. For a moment, I was tempted to rush back to the club-car and show the thing to the colonel and the sandy-haired man. On second thought, I decided against that.

The next thing I banished from my mind was the adjective "incredible." I had to credit it; I had the proof in my vest pocket. The coincidence arising from our topic of conversation didn't bother me too much, either. It was the topic which

had drawn him into it. And, as the sandy-haired man had pointed out, we know nothing, one way or another, about these other worlds; we certainly don't know what barriers separate them from our own, or how often those barriers may fail. I might have thought more about that if I'd been in physical science. I wasn't; I was in American history. So what I thought about was what sort of country that other United States must be, and what its history must have been.

The man's costume was basically the same as ours—same general style, but many little differences of fashion. I had the impression that it was the costume of a less formal and conservative society than ours and a more casual way of life. It could be the sort of costume into which ours would evolve in another thirty or so years. There was another odd thing. I'd noticed him looking curiously at both the waiter and the porter, as though something about them surprised him. The only thing they had in common was their race, the same as every other passenger-car attendant. But he wasn't used to seeing Chinese working in railway cars.

And there had been that remark about the Civil War and the Jackson Administration. I wondered what Jackson he had been talking about; not Andrew Jackson, the Tennessee militia general who got us into war with Spain in 1810, I hoped. And the Civil War; that had baffled me completely. I wondered if it had been a class-war, or a sectional conflict. We'd had plenty of the latter, during our first century, but all of them had been settled peacefully and Constitutionally. Well, some of the things he'd read in Lingmuir's *Social History* would be surprises for him, too.

And then I took the bill out for another examination. It must have gotten mixed with his spendable money—it was about the size of ours—and I wondered how he had acquired enough of our money to pay his train fare. Maybe he'd had a diamond and sold it, or maybe he'd had a gun and held somebody up. If he had, I didn't know that I blamed him, under the circumstances. I had an idea that he had some realization of what had happened to him—the book, and the fake accent, to cover any mistakes he might make. Well, I wished him luck, and then I unfolded the dollar bill and looked at it again.

In the first place, it had been issued by the United States Department of Treasury itself, not the United States Bank or one of the State Banks. I'd have to think over the implications of that carefully. In the second place, it was a silver certificate; why, in this other United States, silver must be an acceptable monetary metal; maybe equally so with gold, though I could hardly believe that. Then I looked at the picture on the gray obverse side, and had to strain my eyes on the fine print under it to identify it. It was Washington, all right, but a much older Washington than any of the pictures of him I had ever seen. Then I realized that I knew just where the Crossroads of Destiny for his world and mine had been.

As every schoolchild among us knows, General George Washington was

shot dead at the Battle of Germantown, in 1777, by an English, or, rather, Scottish, officer, Patrick Ferguson—the same Patrick Ferguson who invented the breech-loading rifle that smashed Napoleon's armies. Washington, today, is one of our lesser national heroes, because he was our first military commander-in-chief. But in this other world, he must have survived to lead our armies to victory and become our first President, as was the case with the man who took his place when he was killed.

I folded the bill and put it away carefully among my identification cards, where it wouldn't a second time get mixed with the money I spent, and as I did, I wondered what sort of a President George Washington had made, and what part, in the history of that other United States, had been played by the man whose picture appears on our dollar bills—General and President Benedict Arnold.

CULLY

By all the laws of nature, he should have been dead. But if he were alive ... then there was something he had to find.

Above him eighty feet of torpid, black water hung like a shroud of Death, and still he heard his ragged breathing. And something else. Cully concentrated on that sound, and the rhythmic pulsing of his heart. Somehow he had to retain a hold on his sanity ... or his soul.

After an hour of careful breathing and exploring of body sensations, Cully realized he could move. He flexed an arm; a mote of gold sand sifted upward in the dark water. It had a pleasant color, in contrast with the ominous shades of the sea. In a few moments, he had struggled to a sitting position, delighting in the curtain of glittering metal grains whirling around him as he moved.

And the other sound. A humming in his mind; a distant burble of tiny voices of other minds. Words swirling in giddy patterns he couldn't understand.

Shortly thereafter, Cully discovered why he still lived, breathed: a suit. A yellow, plastic, water-tight suit, with an orange-on-black shield on the left breast pocket, and a clear bubble-helmet. He felt weight on his back and examined it: two air tanks and their regulator, a radio, and ... the box.

Suit, tanks, regulator; radio, black water, box; sand, sea, stillness.

Cully considered his world. It was small; it was conceivable; it was incomplete.

Where is it?

"Where is what?" He knew he had a voice—a means of communication between others of his kind, using low-frequency heat waves caused by agitation of air molecules. Why couldn't he make it work?

Words. Thousands of them, at his beck and call. What were they? What did they mean? He shifted uncomfortably in the tight yellow suit, searching the near horizon for ...

Where is it?

A vague calling came from beyond the black sea curtain. Objectively, because he could do nothing to stop them, he watched his feet pick up, move for-

ward, put down; pick up, move forward, put down. Funny. He had the feeling, the concept, that this action held meaning. It was supposed to cause some reaction, accomplish an act. He wondered at the regular movement of his legs. One of them hurt. A hurt is a sensation of pain, caused by over-loading sensory-units in the body; a hurt is bad, because it indicates something is wrong.

Something certainly was wrong. Something stirred in Cully's mind. He stopped and sat down on the sandy sea bottom, gracefully, like a ballet dancer. He examined his foot. There was a tiny hole in the yellow plastic fabric, and a thin string of red-black was oozing out. Blood. He knew.

He was bleeding. He could do nothing about it. He got up and resumed walking.

Where is it?

Cully lifted his head in annoyance at the sharp thought.

"Go away," he said in a low, pleading voice. The sound made him feel better. He began muttering to himself.

"Water, black, s-sand, hurt. Pain. Radio tanks ..."

It didn't sound right. After a few minutes, he was quiet. The manythoughts were calling him. He must go to the manythoughts.

If his foot was bleeding, then something had happened; if something had happened, then his foot was bleeding.

"No!"

If something had happened, then maybe other things had happened—before that. But how could something happen in a world of flat gold sand and flaccid sea? Surely there was something wrong. Wrong: the state of being not-right; something had happened that was not-right. Cully stared at the edges of the unmoving curtain before him.

Where is it?

It was a driving, promise-filled concept. No words; just the sense that something wonderful lay just beyond reach. But this voice was different from the manythoughts. It was directing his body; his mind was along for the ride.

The sameness of the sea and sand became unbearable. It was too-right, somehow. Cully felt anger, and kicked up eddies of dust. It changed the sameness a little. He kicked more up, until it swirled around him in a thick gold haze, blotting out the terrible emptiness of the sea.

He felt another weight at his side. He found a holster and gun. He recognized neither. Again he watched objectively as his hand pulled the black object out and handled it. His body was evidently familiar with it, though it was strange to his eyes. His finger slipped automatically into the trigger sheaf. His legs were still working under two drives: the manythoughts' urging, and something else,

buried in him. A longing. Up-and-down, back-and-forth.

Where is it?

Anger, frustration flared in him. His hand shot out, gun at ready. He turned around slowly. Through the settling trail of suspended sand, nothing was visible.

Again he was moving. Something made his legs move. He walked on through the shrouds of Death until he felt a taut singing in his nerves. An irrational fear sprang out in him, cascading down his spine, and Cully shuddered. Ahead there was some_thing. Two motives: get there because it (they?) calls; get there because you must.

Where is it?

The mind-voice was excited, demanding. Something was out there, besides the sameness. Cully walked on, trailing gold. The death-curtain parted ...

An undulating garden of blue-and-gold streamers suddenly drifted toward him on an unfelt current. Cully was held, entranced. They flowed before him, their colors dazzling, hypnotic.

Come closer, Earthling, the manythoughts spoke inside his head, soothingly.

Here it is! Cully's mind shouted.

Cully's mind was held, hypnotized, but his body moved of its own volition.

He moved again. His mind and the manythoughts' spoke: fulfillment—almost. There was one action left that must be completed.

Cully's arms moved. They detached the small black box from his pack. He moved on into the midst of the weaving, gold-laced plants. Little spicules licked out from their flexing stalks and jabbed, unsensed, into Cully's body to draw nourishment. From the manythoughts came the sense of complete fulfillment.

From Cully's mind came further orders.

Lie down. It was a collective concept. *Lie still. We are friends.*

He could not understand. They were speaking words; words were beyond him. His head shook in despair. The voices were implanting an emotion of horror at what his hands were doing, but he had no control over his body. It was as if it were not his.

The black box was now lying in the sand among the streaming plants. Cully's fingers reached out and caressed a small panel. A soundless 'click' ran through the murkiness. The strangely beautiful, gold-laced blue plants began a writhing dance. Their spicules withdrew and jabbed, withdrew and jabbed. A rending, silent scream tore the quiet waters.

NO! they cried. It was a negative command, mixed in with the terrible screaming. *Turn it off!*

"Stop it, stop it!" Cully tried to say, but there were no words. He tried to cover his ears within the helmet, but the cries went on. Emotions roiled the water:

pain, hurt, reproach. Cully sobbed. Something was wrong here; something was killing the plants—the beautiful blue things! The plants were withering, dying. He looked up at them, stupefied, not understanding, tears streaming down his face. What did they want from him? What had he done ...

Where is it?

A different direction materialized; a new concept of desire.

Cully's body turned and crawled away from the wonderful, dying garden, oblivious to the pleadings floating, now weakly, in the torpid water. He scuffed up little motes of golden sand, leaving a low-lying scud along the bottom, back to the little black box in the garden. The plants, the box, all were forgotten by now. Cully crawled on, not knowing why. A rise appeared; surprise caught Cully unaware. A change in the sameness!

Where is it?

Again the voice was insistent. His desire was close ahead; he did not look back at the black churning on the sea bottom. His legs worked, his chest heaved, words swirled in his mind. He topped the rise.

Below him, in the center of a shallow golden bowl, floated a long, shiny cylinder. Even from here he knew it was huge. He knew other things about it: how heavy it was; how it was; that it carried others of his kind. He had been in it before. And they were waiting for him. He lurched on.

"Captain! Here comes Cully!" the midshipman shouted from the airlock. "Look what they've done to him!"

The old man's grey eyes took in the spectacle without visible emotion. He watched the pathetic, bleeding yellow plastic sack crawl up to the ship and look up. His hands reached down and lifted Cully up into the lock.

They took his suit off and stared with loathing at what had once been a man. A white scar zig-zagged across his forehead. The Captain bent close, in range of the dim blue eyes.

"It was a brave thing you did, Cully. The whole system will be grateful. Venus could never be colonized as long as those cannibals were there to eat men, and drive men mad." Cully fingered the scar on his forehead, and looked unseeing into the old man's compassionate eyes. "I'm sorry Cully. We all are. But there was no other way. Prefrontal lobotomy, destruction of your speech center ... it was the only way you could get past the telepaths and destroy them. I'm sorry, Cully. The race of Man shall long honor your name."

Cully smiled at the old man, the words churning in his brain; but he did not understand.

Where is it?

The emptiness was still there.

DAMNED IF YOU DON'T

You can and you can't;
You will and you won't.
You'll be damn'd if you do;
You'll be damn'd if you don't.

—LORENZO DOW; "Definition of Calvinism"

We've all heard of the wonderful invention that the Big Corporation or the Utilities suppressed...? Usually, that Wonderful Invention won't work, actually. But there's another possibility, too....

The workshop-laboratory was a mess. Sam Bending looked it over silently; his jaw muscles were hard and tense, and his eyes were the same.

To repeat what Sam Bending thought when he saw the junk that had been made of thousands of dollars worth of equipment would not be inadmissible in a family magazine, because Bending was not particularly addicted to four-letter vulgarities. But he was a religious man—in a lax sort of way—so repeating what ran through his mind that gray Monday in February of 1981 would be unfair to the memory of Samson Francis Bending.

Sam Bending folded his hands over his chest. It was not an attitude of prayer; it was an attempt to keep those big, gorillalike hands from smashing something. The fingers intertwined, and the hands tried to crush each other, which was a good way to keep them from actually crushing anything else.

He stood there at the door for a full minute—just looking.

The lab—as has been said—was a mess. It would have looked better if someone had simply tossed a grenade in it and had done with it. At least the results would have been random and more evenly dispersed.

But whoever had gone about the wrecking of the lab had gone about it in a workmanlike way. Whoever had done the job was no amateur. The vandal had known his way about in a laboratory, that was obvious. Leads had been cut carefully; equipment had been shoved aside without care as to what happened to it, but with great care that the shover should not be damaged by the shoving; the

invader had known exactly what he was after, and exactly how to get to it.

And he—whoever he was—had gotten his hands on what he wanted.

The Converter was gone.

Sam Bending took his time in regaining his temper. He had to. A man who stands six feet three, weighs three hundred pounds, and wears a forty-eight size jacket can't afford to lose his temper very often or he'll end up on the wrong end of a homicide charge. That three hundred pounds was composed of too much muscle and too little fat for Sam Bending to allow it to run amok.

At last, he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and let his tense nerves, muscles, and tendons sag—he pretended someone had struck him with a dose of curare. He let his breath out slowly and opened his eyes again.

The lab still looked the same, but it no longer irritated him. It was something to be accepted as done. It was something to investigate, and—if possible—avenge. But it was no longer something to worry about or lose his temper over.

I should have expected it, he thought wryly. They'd have to do something about it, wouldn't they?

But the funny thing was that he hadn't expected it—not in modern, law-abiding America.

He reached over to the wall switch to turn on the lights, but before his hand touched it, he stopped the motion and grinned to himself. No point in turning on the switch when he knew perfectly well that there was no power behind it. Still—

His fingers touched the switch anyway. And nothing happened.

He shrugged and went over to the phone.

He let his eyes wander over the wreckage as his right index finger spun the dial. Actually, the room wasn't as much of a shambles as it had looked on first sight. The—burglar?—hadn't tried to get at anything but the Converter. He hadn't known exactly where it was, but he'd been able to follow the leads to its hiding place. That meant that he knew his beans about power lines, anyway.

It also meant that he hadn't been an ordinary burglar. There were plenty of other things around for a burglar to make money out of. Unless he knew what it was, he wouldn't have gone to the trouble of stealing the Converter.

On the other hand, if he had—

"Police Department," said a laconic voice from the speaker. At the same time, the blue-clad image of a police officer appeared on the screen. He looked polite, but he also looked as though he expected nothing more than a routine call.

Bending gave the cop's sleeve a quick glance and said: "Sergeant, my name is Samson Bending. Bending Consultants, 3991 Marden—you'll find it in the phone book. Someone broke into my place over the weekend, and I'd appreciate it if you'd send someone around."

The sergeant's face showed that he still thought it was routine. "Anything missing, sir?"

"I'm not sure," said Bending carefully. "I'll have to make a check. I haven't touched anything. I thought I'd leave that for the detectives. But you can see for yourself what's happened."

He stepped back from the screen and the Leinster cameras automatically adjusted for the greater distance to the background.

"Looks like you had a visitor, all right," said the police officer. "What is that? A lab of some kind you've got there?"

"That's right," Bending said. "You can check it with the Register."

"Will do, Mr. Bending," agreed the sergeant. "We'll send the Technical Squad around in any case." He paused, and Sam could see that he'd pressed an alarm button. There was more interest in his manner, too. "Any signs that it might be kids?" he asked.

Sam shrugged. "Hard to tell. Might be. Might not." He knew good and well that it wasn't a JD gang that had invaded his lab. He grinned ingratiatingly. "I figure you guys can tell me more about that than I could tell you."

The sergeant nodded. "Sure. O.K., Mr. Bending; you just hold on. Don't touch anything; we'll have a copter out there as soon as we can. O.K.?"

"O.K.," Sam agreed. He cut off as the cop's image began to collapse.

Sam Bending didn't obey the cop's order to touch nothing. He couldn't afford to—not at this stage of the game. He looked over everything—the smashed oscilloscopes, the overturned computer, the ripped-out meters—everything. He lifted a couple of instruments that had been toppled to the floor, raising them carefully with a big screwdriver, used as a lever. When he was through, he was convinced that he knew exactly who the culprit was.

Oh, he didn't know the name of the man, or men, who had actually committed the crime. Those things were, for the moment, relatively unimportant. The police might find them, but that could wait. The thing that was important was that Bending was certain within his own mind who had paid to have the lab robbed.

Not that he could make any accusations to the police, of course. That wouldn't do at all. But he knew. He was quite certain.

He left the lab itself and went into the outer rooms, the three rooms that constituted the clients' waiting room, his own office, and the smaller office of Nita Walder, the girl who took care of his files and correspondence.

A quick look told him that nothing in the offices had been disturbed. He shrugged his huge shoulders and sat down on the long couch in the waiting room.

Much good it may do them, he thought pleasantly. The Converter won't be worth the stuff it's made of if they try to open it.

He looked at the clock on the wall and frowned. It was off by five hours. Then he grinned and looked at his wrist watch. Of course the wall clock was Off. It had stopped when the power had been cut off. When the burglars had cut the leads to the Converter, everything in the lab had stopped.

It was eight seventeen. Sam Bending lit a cigarette and leaned back to wait for the cops. United States Power Utilities, Monopolated, had overstepped themselves this time.

Bending Consultants, as a title for a business, was a little misleading because of the plural ending of the last word. There was only one consultant, and that was Samson Francis Bending. His speciality was the engineering design of atomic power plants—both the old fashioned heavy-metal kind and the newer, more elegant, stellarators, which produced power by hydrogen-to-helium conversion.

Bending made good money at it. He wasn't a millionaire by any means, but he had enough money to live comfortably on and enough extra to experiment around on his own. And, primarily, it had always been the experimentation that had been the purpose of Bending Consultants; the consulting end of the business had always been a monetary prop for the lab itself. His employees—mostly junior engineers and engineering draftsmen—worked in the two-story building next door to the lab. Their job was to make money for the company under Bending's direction while Bending himself spent as much time as he could fussing around with things that interested him.

The word "genius" has several connotations, depending on how one defines a genius. Leaving aside the Greek, Roman and Arabic definitions, a careful observer will find that there are two general classes of genius: the "partial" genius, and the "general" genius. Actually, such a narrow definition doesn't do either kind justice, but defining a human being is an almost impossible job, anyway, so we'll have to do the best we can with the tools we have to work with.

The "partial" genius follows the classic definition. "A genius is a man with a one-track mind; an idiot has one track less." He's a real wowser at one class of knowledge, and doesn't know spit about the others.

The "general" genius doesn't specialize. He's capable of original thought in any field he works in.

The trouble is that, because of the greater concentration involved, the partial genius usually gets more recognition than the general—that is, if he gets any recognition at all. Thus, the mathematical and optical work of Sir Isaac Newton show true genius; his theological and political ideas weren't worth the paper he wrote them on. Similar accusations might be leveled against Albert Einstein—and many others.

The general genius isn't so well known because he spreads his abilities

over a broad area. Some—like Leonardo da Vinci—have made a name for themselves, but, in general, they have remained in the background.

Someone once defined a specialist as "a man who learns more and more about less and less until he finally knows everything about nothing." And there is the converse, the general practitioner, who knows "less and less about more and more until he finally knows nothing about everything."

Both types can produce geniuses, and there is, of course, a broad spectrum in between. Da Vinci, for instance, became famous for his paintings; he concentrated on that field because he knew perfectly well that his designs for such things as airplanes were impracticable at the time, whereas the Church would pay for art.

Samson Bending was a genius, granted; but he was more toward the "special" than the "general" side of the spectrum. His grasp of nuclear physics was far and away beyond that of any other scientist of his day; his ability to handle political and economic relationships was rather feeble.

As he sat in his waiting room on that chill day of February, 1981, his mind was centered on nuclear physics, not general economics. Not that Bending was oblivious to the power of the Great God Ammon; Bending was very fond of money and appreciated the things it could achieve. He simply didn't appreciate the overall power of Ammon. At the moment, he was brooding darkly over the very fact of existence of Power Utilities, and trying to figure out a suitable rejoinder to their coup de démon.

And then he heard the whir of helicopter blades over the building. The police had come.

He opened the door of the lab building as they came up the steps. There were two plainclothes men—the Technical Squad, Bending knew—and four uniformed officers.

The plainclothesman in the lead, a tall, rather thin man, with dark straight hair and a small mustache, said: "Mr. Bending? I'm Sergeant Ketzel. Mind if the boys take a look at the scene? And I'd like to ask a few questions?"

"Fine," said Sam Bending. "Come on in."

He showed the officers to the lab, and telling them nothing, left them to their work. Then he went into his office, followed by Sergeant Ketzel. The detective took down all the pertinent data that Bending chose to give him, and then asked Bending to go with him to the lab.

The other plainclothesman came up to Sergeant Ketzel and Bending as they entered. "Pretty easy to see what happened," he said. "Come on over and take a look." He led them over to the wall where the Converter had been hidden.

"See," he said, "here's your main power line coming in here. It's been burned off. They shut off the power to cut off the burglar alarm to that safe over

there."

Ketzel shook his head slowly, but said nothing for the moment. He looked at Bending. "Has the safe been robbed?"

"I don't know," Bending admitted. "I didn't touch it after I saw all this wreckage."

Ketzel told a couple of the uniformed men to go over the safe for evidence. While they waited, Bending looked again at the hole in the wall where the Converter had been. And it suddenly struck him that, even if he had reported the loss of the Converter to the police, it would be hard to prove. The thief had taken care to burn off the ends of the old leads that had originally come into the building. Bending himself had cut them a week before to install the Converter. Had they been left as they were, Bending could have proved by the oxidation of the surface that they had been cut a long time before the leads on this side of the Converter. But both had been carefully fused by a torch.

"Nothing on the safe," said one of the officers. "No prints, at any rate. Micros might show glove or cloth traces, but—" He shrugged.

"Would you mind opening the safe, Mr. Bending?" Sergeant Ketzel asked.

"Certainly," Bending said. He wondered if the safe had been robbed. In the certainty that it was only the Converter that the burglars had been after, he hadn't even thought about the safe.

Bending touched the handle, turned it a trifle, and the door swung open easily in his hand. "It wasn't even locked," Bending said, almost to himself.

He looked inside. The safe had been thoroughly gone through, but as far as Bending could see, there were no papers missing.

"Don't touch anything in there, Mr. Bending," said Ketzel, "Just tell us as much as you can by looking at it."

"The papers have been disturbed," Bending said carefully, "but I don't think anything is missing, except the petty cash box."

"Uh-huh," Ketzel grunted significantly. "Petty cash box. About how much was in it, Mr. Bending?"

"Three or four thousand, I imagine: you'll have to ask Jim Luckman, my business manager. He keeps track of things like that."

"Three or four thousand in petty cash?" Ketzel asked, as though he'd prefer Bending to correct the figure to "two or three hundred."

"About that. Sometimes we have to order equipment of one kind or another in a hurry, and we can usually expedite matters if we can promise cash. You know how it is."

Sergeant Ketzel nodded sourly. He evidently knew only too well how it was. Even the most respectable businessmen were doing occasional business with the

black market in technological devices. But he didn't say anything to Bending.

"What did the cash box look like?" he asked.

Bending held out his hands to measure off a distance. "About so long—ten inches, I guess; maybe six inches wide and four deep. Thin sheet steel, with a gray crackle finish. There was a lock on it, but it wasn't much of one; since it was kept in the safe, there was no need for a strong lock."

Sergeant Ketzel nodded. "In other words, an ordinary office cash box. No distinguishing marks at all?"

"It had 'Bending Consultants' on the top. And underneath that, the word 'Lab'. In black paint. That 'Lab' was to distinguish it from the petty cash box in the main office."

"I see. Do you know anything about the denominations of the bills? Were they marked in any way?"

Bending frowned. "I don't know. You'd have to ask Luckman about that, too."

"Where is he now?"

"Home, I imagine. He isn't due to report for work until ten."

"O.K. Will you leave word that we want to talk to him when he comes in? It'll take us a while to get all the information we can from the lab, here." He looked back at the hole in the wall. "It still doesn't make sense. Why should they go to all that trouble just to shut off a burglar alarm?" He shook his head and went over to where the others were working.

It was hours before the police left, and long before they were gone Sam Bending had begun to wish fervently that he had never called them. He felt that he should have kept his mouth shut and fought Power Utilities on the ground they had chosen. They had known about the Converter only two weeks, and they had already struck. He tried to remember exactly how the Utilities representative had worded what he'd said, and couldn't.

Well, there was an easy way to find out. He went over to his files and took out the recording for Friday, 30 January 1981. He threaded it through the sound player—he had no particular desire to look at the man's face again—and turned on the machine. The first sentence brought the whole scene back to mind.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Bending," the man whose card had announced him as Richard Olcott. He was a rather average-sized man, with a fiftyish face, graying hair that was beginning to thin, and an expression like that of a friendly poker player—pleasant, but inscrutable.

"I always have time to see a representative of Power Utilities, Mr. Olcott," Bending said. "Though I must admit that I'm more used to dealing with various engineers who work for your subsidiaries."

"Not subsidiaries, please," Olcott admonished in a friendly tone. "Like the

Bell Telephone Company, Power Utilities is actually a group of independent but mutually co-operative companies organized under a parent company."

Bending grinned. "I stand corrected. What did you have on your mind, Mr. Olcott?"

Olcott's hesitation was of half-second duration, but it was perceptible.

"Mr. Bending," he began, "I understand that you have been ... ah ... working on a new and ... ah ... radically different method of power generation. Er ... is that substantially correct?"

Bending looked at the man, his blocky, big-jawed face expressionless. "I've been doing experimenting with power generators, yes," he said after a moment. "That's my business."

"Oh, quite, quite. I understand that," Olcott said hurriedly. "I ... ah ... took the trouble to look up your record before I came. I'm well aware of the invaluable work you've done in the power field."

"Thank you," Bending said agreeably. He waited to see what the other would say next. It was his move.

"However," Olcott said, "that's not the sort of thing I was referring to." He leaned forward in his chair, and his bright gray eyes seemed to take on a new life; his manner seemed to alter subtly.

"Let me put my ... our cards on the table, Mr. Bending. We understand that you have designed, and are experimenting with, an amazingly compact power source. We understand that little remains but to get the bugs out of your pilot model.

"Naturally, we are interested. Our business is supplying the nation with power. Anything from a new type solar battery on up is of interest to us." He stopped, waiting for Bending to speak.

Bending obliged. "I see Petternek let the cat out of the bag prematurely," he said with a smile. "I hadn't intended to spring it until it was a polished work of engineering art. It's been more of a hobby than anything else, you see."

Olcott smiled disarmingly. "I'm not acquainted with Mr. Petternek; to be quite honest, I have no idea where our engineers picked up the information."

"He's an engineer," Bending said. "Friends of mine. He probably got a little enthusiastic in a conversation with one of your boys. He seemed quite impressed by my Converter."

"Possibly that is the explanation." Olcott paused. "Converter, you say? That's what you call it?"

"That's right. I couldn't think up any fancier name for it. Oh, I suppose I could have, but I didn't want anything too descriptive."

"And the word 'converter' isn't descriptive?"

"Hardly," said Bending with a short laugh. "Every power supply is a converter of some kind. A nickel-cadmium battery converts chemical energy into electrical energy. A solar battery converts radiation into electrical current. The old-fashioned, oil- or coal-burning power plants converted chemical energy into heat energy, converted that into kinetic energy, and that, in turn was converted into electrical energy. The heavy-metal atomic plant does almost the same thing, except that it uses nuclear reactions instead of chemical reactions to produce the heat. The stellarator is a converter, too.

"About the only exception I can think of is the electrostatic condenser, and you could say that it converts static electricity into a current flow if you wanted to stretch a point. On the other hand, a condenser isn't usually considered as a power supply."

Olcott chuckled. "I see your point. Could you give me a rough idea of the principle on which your Converter operates?"

Bending allowed himself a thoughtful frown. "I'd rather not, just now, Mr. Olcott. As I said, I want to sort of spring this full-blown on the world." He grinned. He looked like a small boy who had just discovered that people liked him; but it was a calculated expression, not an automatic one.

Olcott looked into Bending's eyes without seeing them. He ran his tongue carefully over the inside of his teeth before he spoke. "Mr. Bending." Pause. "Mr. Bending, we—and by 'we', I mean, of course, Power Utilities,—have heard a great deal about this ... this Converter." His chocolate-brown eyes bored deep into the gray eyes of Samson Bending. "Frankly," he continued, "we are inclined to discount ninety per cent of the rumors that come to us. Most of them are based on purely crackpot ideas. None the less, we investigate them. If someone does discover a new process of producing power, we can't afford to be blind to new ideas just because they happen to come from ... ah ... unorthodox sources.

"You, Mr. Bending, are an unusual case. Any rumor concerning your work, no matter how fantastic, is worth looking into on your reputation alone, even though the claims may be utterly absurd."

"I have made no claims," Bending interposed.

Olcott raised a lean hand. "I understand that, Mr. Bending. None the less, others—who may or may not know what they are talking about—have made this claim for you." Olcott settled back in his chair and folded his hands across his slight paunch. "You've worked with us before, Mr. Bending; you know that we can—and do—pay well for advances in the power field which are contributed by our engineers. As you know, our contract is the standard one—any discovery made by an engineer while in our employ is automatically ours. None the less, we give such men a handsome royalty." He paused, opened his brief case, and pulled out a notebook. After referring to it, he looked up at Bending and said:

"You, yourself have benefitted by this policy. According to our records, you are drawing royalties from three patented improvements in the stellarator which were discovered at times when you were employed by us—or, rather, by one of our associative corporations—in an advisory capacity. Those discoveries were, by contract, ours. By law, we could use them as we saw fit without recompense to you, other than our regular fee. None the less, we chose to pay you a royalty because that is our normal policy with all our engineers and scientific research men. We find it more expedient to operate thus."

Bending was getting a little tired of Olcott's "none the less," but he didn't show it. "Are you trying to say that my Converter was invented during my employ with your company, Mr. Olcott?"

Olcott cleared his throat and shook his head. "No. Not necessarily. It is true that we might have a case on those grounds, but, under the circumstances, we feel it inexpedient to pursue such a course."

Which means, Bending thought, that you don't have a case at all. "Then just what are you driving at, Mr. Olcott?" he asked aloud.

"I'll put my cards on the table, Mr. Bending," Olcott said.

You've already said that, Bending thought, and I've seen no evidence of it. "Go ahead," he said.

"Thank you." He cleared his throat again. "If your invention is ... ah ... worth while, we are prepared to negotiate with you for use and/or purchase of it."

Bending had always disliked people who said or wrote "and/or," but he had no desire to antagonize the Power Utilities representative by showing personal pique. "Let me understand you clearly," he said. "Power Utilities wants to buy my rights to the Converter. Right?"

Olcott cleared his throat a third time. "In a word, yes. Provided, of course, that it is actually worth our while. Remember, we know almost nothing about it; the claims made for it by our ... ah ... anonymous informer are ... well, ah ... rather fantastic. But your reputation—" He let the sentence hang.

Bending was not at all immune to flattery. He grinned. "Do you mean that you came to me to talk about buying an invention you weren't even sure existed—just because of my reputation?"

"Frankly, yes," said Olcott. "Your reputation is ... ah ... shall we say, a good one in power engineering circles."

"Are you an engineer?" Bending asked suddenly.

Olcott blinked. "Why, no. No, I am not. I'm a lawyer. I thought you understood that."

"Sorry," Bending said. "I didn't. Most of the financial work around here is done through my Mr. Luckman. I'm not acquainted with the monetary end of the

business."

Olcott smiled. "Quite all right. Evidently I am not as well known to you as you are to me. Not that it matters. Why did you ask?"

Bending stood up. "I'm going to show you something, Mr. Olcott," he said. "Would you care to come with me to the lab?"

Olcott was on his feet in a second. "I'd be glad to, Mr. Bending."

Bending led the man into the lab. "Over here," he said. At the far end of the laboratory was a thick-legged table cluttered with lengths of wire, vacuum tubes, transistors, a soldering gun, a couple of meters, and the other various paraphernalia of an electronics workshop. In the center of the table, surrounded by the clutter, sat an oblong box. It didn't look like much; it was just an eighteen by twelve by ten box, made of black plastic, featureless, except for a couple of dials and knobs on the top of it, and a pair of copper studs sticking out of the end.

Still, Olcott didn't look skeptical. Nor surprised. Evidently, his informant had had plenty of information. Or else his poker face was better than Bending had thought.

"This is your pilot model?" Olcott asked.

"One of them, yes. Want to watch it go through its paces?"

"Very much."

"O.K. First, though, just how good is your technical education? I mean, how basic do I have to get?" Sam Bending was not exactly a diplomat.

Olcott, however, didn't look offended. "Let's say that if you keep it on the level of college freshman physics I'll get the general drift. All right?"

"Sure. I don't intend to get any more technical than that, anyway. I'm going to tell you what the Converter does—not how."

"Fair enough—for the moment. Go ahead."

"Right." Sam flipped a switch on the top of the box. "Takes a minute or so to warm up," he said.

When the "minute or so" had passed, Bending, who had been watching the meters on the top of the machine, said: "See this?" He pointed at a dial face. "That's the voltage. It's controlled by this vernier knob here." He turned the knob, and the needle on the voltmeter moved obligingly upwards. "Anything from ten to a thousand volts," he said. "Easily adjusted to suit your taste."

"I don't think I'd like the taste of a thousand volts," Olcott said solemnly. "Might affect the tongue adversely." Olcott didn't look particularly impressed. Why should he? Anyone can build a machine that can generate high voltage.

"Is that AC or DC?" he asked.

"DC," said Bending. "But it can easily be converted to AC. Depends on what you want to use it for."

Olcott nodded. "How much power does that thing deliver?"

Sam Bending had been waiting for that question. He delivered his answer with all the nonchalance of a man dropping a burnt match in an ash tray.

"Five hundred horsepower."

Olcott's face simply couldn't hold its expressionless expression against something like that. His lips twitched, and his eyes blinked. "Five hundred what?"

"I will not make the obvious pun," said Bending. "I said 'five hundred horsepower'—unquote. About three hundred and seventy-five kilowatts, maximum."

Olcott appeared to be unable to say anything. He simply stared at the small, innocuous-looking Converter. Bending was unable to decide whether Olcott was overawed by the truth or simply stricken dumb by what must sound like a monstrous lie.

Olcott licked his lips with the tip of his small, pink tongue. "Five hundred horsepower. Hm-m-m." He took a deep breath. "No wonder those copper studs are so thick."

"Yeah," said Bending. "If I short 'em across at low voltage, they get hot."

"Short them across?" Olcott's voice sounded harsh.

Bending was in his seventh heaven, and he showed it. His grin was running as high an energy output as that he claimed for the Converter. "Sure. The amperage is self-limiting. You can only draw about four hundred amps off the thing, no matter how low you put the voltage. When I said five hundred HP, I meant at a thousand volts. As a matter of fact, the available power in horsepower is roughly half the voltage. But that only applies to this small model. A bigger one could supply more, of course."

"What does it weigh?" asked Olcott, in a hushed voice.

"Little over a hundred pounds," Bending said.

Olcott tore his eyes away from the fantastic little box and looked into Sam Bending's eyes. "May I ask where you're getting power like that?"

"Sure. Hydrogen fusion, same as the stellarator."

"It's powered by deuterium?"

Bending delivered his bombshell. "Nope. Water. Plain, ordinary aitch-two-oh. See those little vents at the side? They exhaust oxygen and helium. It burns about four hundred milligrams of water per hour at maximum capacity."

Olcott had either regained control of himself or had passed the saturation point; Sam couldn't tell which. Olcott said: "Where do you put the water?"

"Why put water in it?" Sam asked coolly. "That small whirring sound you hear isn't the hydrogen-helium conversion; it's a fan blowing air through a cooling coil. Even in the Sahara Desert there's enough moisture in the air to run this baby."

"And the fan is powered—"

"... By the machine itself, naturally," said Bending. "It's a self-contained unit. Of course, with a really big unit, you might have to hire someone to hang out their laundry somewhere in the neighborhood, but only in case of emergencies."

"May I sit down?" asked Olcott. And, without waiting for Sam Bending's permission, he grabbed a nearby chair and sat. "Mr. Bending," he said, "what is the cost of one of those units?"

"Well, that one cost several hundred thousand dollars. But the thing could be mass produced for ... oh, around fifteen hundred dollars. Maybe less."

Olcott absorbed that, blinked, and said: "Is it dangerous? I mean, could it explode, or does it give out radiation?"

"Well, you have to treat it with respect, of course," Bending said. He rubbed his big hands together in an unconscious gesture of triumph. "Just like any power source. But it won't explode; that I can guarantee. And there's no danger from radiation. All the power comes out as electric current."

Sam Bending remained silent while Olcott stared at the little black box. Finally, Olcott put his hands to his face and rubbed his eyes, as though he'd been too long without sleep. When he removed his hands, his eyes were focused on Bending.

"You realize," he said, "that we can't give you any sort of contract until this has been thoroughly checked by our own engineers and research men?"

"Obviously," said Sam Bending. "But—"

"Do you have a patent?" Olcott interrupted.

"It's pending," said Bending. "My lawyer thinks it will go through pretty quickly."

Olcott stood up abruptly. "Mr. Bending, if this machine is actually what you claim it to be—which, of course, we will have to determine for ourselves—I think that we can make you a handsome—a very handsome settlement."

"How much?" Bending asked flatly.

"For full rights—millions," said Olcott without hesitation. "That would be a ... shall we say, an advance ... an advance on the royalties."

"What, no bargaining?" Bending said, in a rather startled tone.

Olcott shook his head. "Mr. Bending, you know the value of such a device as well as I do. You're an intelligent man, and so am I. Haggling will get us nothing but wasted time. We want that machine—we must have that machine. And you know it. And I know you know it. Why should we quibble?

"I can't say: 'Name your price'; this thing is obviously worth a great deal more than even Power Utilities would be able to pay. Not even a corporation like ours can whip up a billion dollars without going bankrupt. What we pay you will

have to be amortized over a period of years. But we—"

"Just a minute, Mr. Olcott," Bending interrupted. "Exactly what do you intend to do with the Converter if I sell it to you?"

Olcott hesitated. "Why ... ah—" He paused. "Actually, I couldn't say," he said at last. "A decision like that would have to be made by the Board. Why?"

"How long do you think it would take you to get into production?"

"I ... ah ... frankly couldn't say," Olcott said cautiously. "Several years, I imagine..."

"Longer than that, I dare say," Bending said, with more than a touch of sarcasm. "As a matter of fact, you'd pretty much have to suppress the Converter, wouldn't you?"

Olcott looked at Bending, his face expressionless. "Of course. For a while. You know very well that this could ruin us."

"The automobile ruined the buggy-whip makers and threw thousands of blacksmiths out of work," Bending pointed out. "Such things are inevitable. Every new invention is likely to have an effect like that if it replaces something older. What do you think atomic energy would have done to coal mining if it weren't for the fact that coal is needed in the manufacture of steel? You can't let considerations like that stand in the way of technological progress, Mr. Olcott."

"Is it a question of money?" Olcott asked quietly.

Bending shook his head. "Not at all. We've already agreed that I could make as much as I want by selling it to you. No; it's just that I'm an idealist of sorts. I intend to manufacture the Converter myself, in order to make sure it gets into the hands of the people."

"I assure you, Mr. Bending, that Power Utilities would do just that—as soon as it became economically feasible for us to do so."

"I doubt it," Sam Bending said flatly. "If any group has control over the very thing that's going to put them out of business, they don't release it; they sit on it. Dictators, for instance, have throughout history, promised freedom to their people 'as soon as it was feasible'. Cincinnatus may have done it, but no one else has in the last twenty-five centuries.

"What do you suppose would have happened in the 1940s if the movie moguls of Hollywood had had the patent rights for television? How many other inventions actually have been held down simply because the interested parties did happen to get their hands on them first?

"No, Mr. Olcott; I don't think I can allow Power Utilities to have a finger in this pie or the public would never get a slice of it."

Olcott stood up slowly from the chair. "I see, Mr. Bending; you're quite frank about your views, anyway." He paused. "I shall have to talk this over with the

Board. There must be some way of averting total disaster. If we find one, we'll let you know, Mr. Bending."

And that was it. That was the line that had stuck in the back of Bending's mind for two weeks. If we find a way of averting total disaster, we'll let you know, Mr. Bending.

And they evidently thought they'd found a way. For two weeks, there had been phone calls from officers of greater or lesser importance in Power Utilities, but they all seemed to think that if they could offer enough money, Sam Bending would capitulate. Finally, they had taken the decisive step of stealing the Converter. Bending wondered how they had known where it was; he had taken the precaution of concealing it, just in case there might be an attempt at robbery, and using it as power supply for the lab had seemed the best hiding place. But evidently someone at Power Utilities had read Poe's "Purloined Letter," too.

He smiled grimly. Even if the police didn't find any clues leading them to the thieves who'd broken into his lab, the boys at Power Utilities would find themselves in trouble. The second they started to open the Converter, it would begin to fuse. If they were quick, whoever opened it should be able to get away from it before it melted down into an unrecognizable mass.

Sam Bending took the tape from the playback and returned it to his files.

He wondered how the Power Utilities boys had managed to find where the Converter was. Checking the power that had been used by Bending Consultants? Possibly. It would show that less had been used in the past two weeks than was normally the case. Only the big building next door was still using current from the power lines. Still, that would have meant that they had read the meter in the last two weeks, which, in turn, meant that they had been suspicious in the first place or they wouldn't have ordered an extra reading.

On the other hand, if—

The visiphone rang.

It was the phone with the unregistered number, a direct line that didn't go through his secretary's switchboard.

He flipped it on. "Yes?" He never bothered to identify himself on that phone; anyone who had the number knew who they were calling. The mild-looking, plumpish, blond-haired man whose face came onto the screen was immediately recognizable.

"How's everything, Mr. Bending?" he asked with cordial geniality.

"Fine, Mr. Trask," Bending answered automatically. "And you?"

"Reasonable, reasonable. I hear you had the police out your way this morning." There was a questioning look in his round blue eyes. "No trouble, I hope."

Sam understood the question behind the statement. Vernon Trask was the

go-between for some of the biggest black market operators in the country. Bending didn't like to have to deal with him, but one had very little choice these days.

"No. No trouble. Burglary in the night. Someone opened my safe and picked up a few thousand dollars, is all."

"I see." Trask was obviously wondering whether some black market operator would be approached by a couple of burglars in the next few days—a couple of burglars trying to peddle apparatus and equipment that had been stolen from Bending. There still were crooks who thought that the black market dealt in stolen goods of that sort.

"Some of my instruments were smashed," Bending said, "but none of them are missing."

"I'm glad to hear that," Trask said. And Bending knew he meant it. The black market boys didn't like to have their customers robbed of scientific equipment; it might reflect back on them. "I just thought I'd explain about missing our appointment this morning," Trask went on. "It was unavoidable; something unexpected came up."

Trask was being cagey, as always. He didn't talk directly, even over a phone that wasn't supposed to be tapped. Bending understood, though. Some of the robotics equipment he'd contracted to get from Trask was supposed to have been delivered that morning, but when the delivery agent had seen the police car out front, he'd kept right on going naturally enough.

"That's all right, Mr. Trask," Bending said. "What with all this trouble this morning, it actually slipped my mind. Another time, perhaps."

Trask nodded. "I'll try to make arrangements for a later date. Thanks a lot, Mr. Bending. Good-by."

Bending said good-by and cut the connection.

Samson Bending didn't like being forced to buy from the black market operators, but there was nothing else to do if one wanted certain pieces of equipment. During the "Tense War" of the late Sixties, the Federal and State governments had gone into a state of near-panic. The war that had begun in the Near East had flashed northwards to ignite the eternal Powder Keg of Europe. But there were no alliances, no general war; there were only periodic armed outbreaks, each one in turn threatening to turn into World War III. Each country found itself agreeing to an armistice with one country while trying to form an alliance with a second and defending itself from or attacking a third.

And yet, during it all, no one quite dared to use the Ultimate Weapons. There was plenty of strafing by fighter planes and sorties by small bomber squadrons, but there was none of the "massive retaliation" of World War II. There could be heard the rattle of small-arms fire and the rumble of tanks and the roar of field cannon, but not once was there the terrifying, all-enveloping blast of nuclear

bombs.

But, at the time, no one knew that it wouldn't happen. The United States and the Soviet Union hovered on the edges of the war, two colossi who hesitated to interfere directly for fear they would have to come to grips with each other.

The situation made the "Brinksmanship" of former Secretary Dulles look as safe as loafing in an easy-chair.

And the bureaucratic and legislative forces of the United States Government had reacted in a fairly predictable manner. The "security" guards around scientific research, which had been gradually diminishing towards the vanishing point, had suddenly been re-imposed—this time, even more stringently and rigidly than ever before.

Coupled with this was another force—apparently unrelated—which acted to tie in with the Federal security regulations. The juvenile delinquent gangs had begun to realize the value of science. Teen-age hoodlums armed with homemade pistols were dangerous enough in the Fifties; add aimed rockets and remote-control bombs to their armories, and you have an almost uncontrollable situation. Something had to be done, and various laws controlling the sale of scientific apparatus had been passed by the fifty states. And—as with their liquor and divorce laws—no two of the states had the same set of laws, and no one of them was without gaping flaws.

By the time the off-again-on-again wars in Europe had been stilled by the combined pressure of the United Nations—in which the United States and the Soviet Union co-operated wholeheartedly, working together in a way they had not done for over twenty years—the "scientific control laws" in the United States had combined to make scientific research almost impossible for the layman, and a matter of endless red tape, forms-in-octuplicate, licenses, permits, investigations, delays, and confusion for the professional.

The answer, of course, was the black market. What bootlegging had done for the average citizen in the Twenties, the black market was doing for scientists fifty years later.

The trouble was that, unlike the Volstead Act, the scientific prohibitions aroused no opposition from the man in the street. Indeed, he rather approved of them. He needed and wanted the products of scientific research, but he had a vague fear of the scientist—the "egghead." To his way of thinking, the laws were cleverly-designed restrictions promulgated by that marvelous epitome of humanity, the common man, to keep the mysterious scientists from meddling with things they oughtn't to.

The result was that the Latin American countries went into full swing, producing just those items which North American scientists couldn't get their hands on, because the laws stayed on the books. During the next ten years, they were

modified slightly, but only very slightly; but the efforts to enforce them became more and more lax. By the time the late Seventies and early Eighties rolled around, the black marketeers were doing very nicely, thank you, and any suggestion from scientists that the laws should be modified was met with an intensive counterpropaganda effort by the operators of the black market.

Actually, the word "operators" is a misnomer. It was known by the authorities at the time that there was only one ring operating; the market was too limited to allow for the big-time operations carried on by the liquor smugglers and distillers of half a century before.

Sam Bending naturally was forced to deal with the black market, just as everyone else engaged in research was; it was, for instance, the only source for a good many technical publications which had been put on the Restricted List. Sam wasn't as dependent on them as college and university research men were, simply because he was engaged in industrial work, which carried much higher priorities than educational work did.

Sam, however, was fed up with the whole mess, and would have given his eyeteeth to clear up the whole stupid farce.

Irritated by every petty distraction at his office, Sam Bending finally gave up trying to cope with anything for the rest of the day. At three in the afternoon, he told his secretary that he was going home, jammed his hat on his head, and went out to his car.

He got in, turned the switch, and listened to the deep hum of the electric motors inside. Somehow, it made him feel so good that the irritations of the day lessened a great deal. He grinned.

Power Utilities hadn't even thought of this hiding place. The Converter in the rear of the car gave the vehicle far more power than it needed, but the extra juice came in handy sometimes. The driving motors wouldn't take the full output of the generators, of course; the Converter hardly had to strain itself to drive the automobile at top speed, and, as long as there was traction, no grade could stall the car. Theoretically, it could climb straight up a wall.

Not that Sam Bending had any intention of climbing a wall with it.

He even had power left over for the sound-effects gadget and the air-heater that made the thing appear to be powered by an ordinary turbo-electric engine. He listened and smiled as the motors made satisfying sounds while he pulled out of the parking lot and into the street. He kept that pleased, self-satisfied grin on his face for six blocks.

And then he began to notice that someone was following him.

At first, he hadn't paid much attention to it. The car was just a common Ford Cruiser of the nondescript steel blue color that was so popular. But Bending had been conscious of its presence for several blocks. He looked carefully in the mir-

ror.

Maybe he was wrong. Maybe it had been several cars of that same color that had moved in and out of the traffic behind him. Well, he'd soon see.

He kept on going toward the North-South Expressway, and kept watching the steel-blue Ford, glancing at his rear view mirror every time he could afford to take his eyes off the traffic.

It moved back and forth, but it was never more than three cars behind him, and usually only one. Coincidence? Possibly.

At Humber Avenue, he turned left and drove southwards. The steel-blue Ford turned, too. Coincidence? Still possible.

He kept on going down Humber Avenue for ten blocks, until he came to the next cross street that would take him to a lower entrance to the North-South Expressway. He turned right, and the Ford followed.

At the ramp leading to the northbound side of the Expressway, the Ford was two cars behind.

Coincidence? No. That's pushing coincidence too far. If the men in the car had actually intended to go north on the Expressway, they would have gone on in the direction they had been taking when Bending first noticed them; they wouldn't have gone ten blocks south out of their way.

Bending's smile became grim. He had never liked the idea of being followed around, and, since the loss of one of his Converters, he was even touchier about the notion. Trouble was, his fancy, souped-up Lincoln was of no use to him at all. He could outrun them on a clear highway—but not on the crowded Expressway. Or, conversely, he could just keep on driving until they were forced to stop for fuel—but that could be a long and tedious trip if they had a full tank. And besides, they might make other arrangements before they went dry.

Well, there was another way.

He stayed on the Expressway for the next twenty miles, going far north of where he had intended to turn off. At the Marysville Exit, he went down the ramp. He had been waiting for a moment when the Ford would be a little farther behind than normal, but it hadn't come; at each exit, the driver of the trailing car would edge up, although he allowed himself to drop behind between exits. Whoever was driving the car knew what he was doing.

At the bottom of the ramp, Bending made a left turn and took the road into Marysville. It was a small town, not more than five or six thousand population, but it was big enough.

There weren't many cars on the streets that led off the main highway. Bending made a right turn and went down one of the quiet boulevards in the residential section. The steel-blue Ford dropped behind as they turned; they didn't want to

make Bending suspicious, evidently.

He came to a quiet street parallel to the highway and made a left turn. As soon as he was out of sight of his pursuers, he shoved down on the accelerator. The car jumped ahead, slamming Bending back in his seat. At the next corner, he turned left again. A glance in the mirror showed him that the Ford was just turning the previous corner.

Bending's heavy Lincoln swung around the corner at high speed and shot back toward the highway. At the next corner, he cut left once more, and the mirror showed that the Ford hadn't made it in time to see him turn.

They'd probably guess he'd gone left, so he made a right turn as soon as he hit the next street, and then made another left, then another right. Then he kept on going until he got to the highway.

A left turn put him back on the highway, headed toward the Expressway. The steel-blue car was nowhere in sight.

Bending sighed and headed back south towards home.

Sam Bending knew there was something wrong when he pulled up in front of his garage and pressed the button on the dashboard that was supposed to open the garage door. Nothing happened.

He climbed out of the car, went over to the door of the garage, and pushed the emergency button. The door remained obstinately shut.

Without stopping to wonder what had happened, he sprinted around to the front door of the house, unlocked it, and pressed the wall switch. The lights didn't come on, and he knew what had happened.

Trailing a stream of blue invective, he ran to the rear of the house and went down the basement stairs. Sure enough. Somebody had taken his house Converter, too.

And they hadn't even had the courtesy to shunt him back onto the power lines.

At his home, he had built more carefully than he had at the lab. He had rigged in a switch which would allow him to use either the Converter or the regular power sources, so that he could work on the Converter if he wanted to. His basement was almost a duplicate of his lab in the city, except that at home he built gadgets just for the fun of watching them work, while at the lab he was doing more serious research.

He went over to the cabinet where the switch was, opened it, and punched the relay button. The lights came on.

He stalked back up the stairs and headed for the visiphone. First, he dialed his patent attorney's office; he needed some advice. If Power Utilities had their hands on two out of three of his Converters, there might be some trouble over

getting the patents through.

The attorney's secretary said he wasn't in, and she didn't know if he expected to be back that day. It was, she informed Bending rather archly, nearly five in the afternoon. Bending thanked her and hung up.

He dialed the man's home, but he wasn't there, either.

Sam Bending stuck a cigarette in his mouth, fired it up, walked over to his easy-chair and sat down to think.

According to the police, the first Converter had been stolen on Friday night. The second one had obviously been taken sometime this morning, while he was in the lab with the police.

That made sense. The first one they'd tried to open had fused, so they decided to try to get a second one. Only how had they known he had had more than one? He hadn't told anyone that he had three—or even two.

Well, no matter. They had found out. The question was, what did he do next? Inform the police of the two thefts or—

There was a car pulling up outside the house.

Sam stood up and glanced out the window. It was a steel-blue Ford.

By Heaven! Did they intend to steal the third Converter, too? And right in front of his eyes, before it even got decently dark?

Sam was so furious that he couldn't even think straight. When the two men climbed out of the car and started walking toward the house, Sam ran back into his study, pulled open his desk drawer, and took out the .38 Special he kept there. It was the work of seconds to thumb six cartridges into the chambers and swing the cylinder shut.

The door chime sounded.

Sam went back into the front room with the revolver in his jacket pocket and his hand ready to fire it.

"Who is it?" he called, in what he hoped was a steady voice.

"We're Special Agents of the FBI," said a voice. "May we see you for a few moments, Mr. Bending?"

"Certainly. Come on in; the door's unlocked." Just walk in, you phonies! Just trot right on in, he thought.

And they did. The two men walked in, removing their hats as they did so.

"We—" one of them began. He stopped when he saw that he was addressing a round, black hole that was only a fraction more than a third of an inch in diameter but looked much, much larger from his viewpoint.

"Get your hands in the air and turn around very slowly," said Bending. "Lean forward and brace your hands against the wall."

They did as they were told. Bending frisked them carefully and thoroughly, thankful that the two years he had spent in the Army hadn't been completely wasted. Neither one of them was carrying a gun.

Bending stepped back and pocketed his own weapon. "All right. You two can turn around now. If you want to try anything, come ahead—but I don't advise it."

The two men turned around. Neither of them was exactly a small man, but the two of them together didn't outweigh Samson Bending by more than fifty pounds.

"What's the idea of the gun, Mr. Bending?" the taller of the two asked. He seemed to be the spokesman for the team.

"I'll ask the questions," Bending said. "But first, I want to tell you that, in the first place, you can get in trouble for impersonating a Federal officer, and, in the second, I don't like being followed. So you just trot right back to the boys at Power Utilities and tell them that if they want to play rough, I am perfectly willing to do likewise. That if they come after me again, I'm going to do some very unpleasant things. Understand?"

"I think we understand," said the spokesman, still relatively unruffled. "But I don't think you do. Would you care to look at our credentials, Mr. Bending?"

"Credentials?" Sam looked startled. Had he made a mistake?

"That's right. May I take my billfold out?"

Bending took his gun out again. "Go ahead. But slowly."

The billfold came out slowly. Bending took it. The identification card and the small gold badge said very plainly that the man was a Special Agent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

"I ... I'm sorry," Bending said weakly. "I thought you were someone else. Some men were following me this afternoon, and—"

"That was us, Mr. Bending. Sorry."

"May I verify this?" Bending asked.

"Certainly. Go right ahead."

Bending phoned the local office of the FBI and verified the identities of the two men. When he cut off, he asked dazedly: "What was it you wanted?"

"Would you mind coming with us—downtown? We'd like to have you see some people."

"Am I under arrest?"

"No." The agent smiled a little. "I suppose, if we had to, we could get you for speeding and reckless driving; that was pretty fancy dodging you did. But we're not supposed to be traffic cops."

Sam smiled feebly. "What's this all about?"

"I haven't the faintest notion, Mr. Bending. Honestly. We were told to stick with you until we got word to pick you up. We got that word just shortly after you ... hm-m-m ... after you left us. Fortunately, we found you at home. It might have been difficult ..."

"Can we go in my car?" Bending asked. "I'd rather not leave it unguarded just now."

"Certainly. I'll go with you, and Steve can follow." He paused. "But I'm afraid you'll have to take that revolver out of your pocket and put it away."

"Sure," Bending said. "Sure."

Bending's mind simply refused to function during the drive back to the city. The FBI agent beside him just sat silently while Sam drove the car.

Once, Sam asked: "Who is it that wants to see me?"

And the FBI man said: "Sorry, Mr. Bending; I can't answer any questions. My job is over as soon as I deliver you."

A little later, Sam had another question. "Can you tell me where we're going, at least?"

"Oh—" the agent laughed, "sure. I thought I had. The General Post Office Building, on Kenmore Drive."

After that, Sam didn't say anything. That this whole affair had something to do with the Converter, Sam had no doubt whatsoever. But he couldn't see exactly what, and none of his wild speculations made sense.

He pulled up at last into the parking lot behind the Post Office Building. The second FBI man came up in the steel-blue Ford, and the three of them got out of the cars and went towards the building. It was quite dark by now, and the street lights were glowing against a faint falling of February mist. Bending, in spite of his topcoat, felt chilly.

They went in the back way, past the uniformed Postal Service guard, and took an elevator to the sixth floor. None of the three had anything to say. They walked down the hall, toward the only office that showed any light behind the frosted glass. The lettering on the glass simply said: Conference Room A-6.

The FBI man who had driven with Sam rapped on the door with gentle knuckles.

"Yes?" said a questioning voice from the other side.

"This is Hodsen, sir. Mr. Bending is with us."

The door opened, and Sam Bending felt mild shock as he saw who it was. He recognized the man from his news photos and TV appearances. It was the Honorable Bertram Condley, Secretary of Economics for the President of the United States.

"Come in, Mr. Bending," the Secretary said pleasantly. Unnecessarily, he

added, "I'm Bertram Condley."

He held out his hand, and Sam took it. "It's a pleasure, Mr. Secretary."

Condley gave out with his best friendly-politico smile. "I'm sorry to have to drag you up here like this, Mr. Bending, but we felt it best this way."

Sam smiled back, with a trace of irony in the smile. "It's a pleasure, Mr. Secretary," he repeated.

Condley nodded, still smiling—but there was a spark in his eyes now. "I see we understand each other. Come on in; I want you to meet the others." He looked at the FBI men. "That's all. For now."

The Federal agents nodded and moved away into the dimness of the corridor.

"Come in, man, come in," the Secretary urged, opening the door wider.

Sam hesitated. The light within the room was none too bright. Then he stepped forward, following the Secretary.

The outer room was dark. Not too dark, but illuminated only by the dim light from the corridor and from the inner room. From that inner room, there was only a glow of light from the frosted glass panel of the door that separated the two rooms.

Condley closed the hall door, and, as Sam stepped forward toward the lighted door, held out a hand to stop him. "Just a moment," he whispered softly. "I think you ought to know what you're walking in to, Mr. Bending."

Bending stood stock-still. "Yes, sir?" he asked, questioningly.

"I suppose you know what this is all about?" Secretary Condley asked softly.

"The Converter, I imagine," Sam Bending said.

Condley nodded, his gray hair gleaming silver in the dim light. "Exactly. I'm sorry we had to drag you up here this way, Mr. Bending, but, in the circumstances, we felt it to be the best way." He took a breath. "Do you know why we called you here?"

"No," Sam said honestly.

Condley's head nodded again. "You're in for an argument, Mr. Bending. A very powerful one, I hope. We want to convince you of something." Again he paused. "Are you an open-minded man, Mr. Bending?"

Sam Bending followed the Secretary's lead, and kept his voice low. "I like to think so, Mr. Secretary." He recognized that Condley was preparing him for something, and he recognized that the preliminary statements were calculated to soften him. And he recognized the fact that they did soften him. All right—what was the argument?

"You're an engineer, Mr. Bending," Condley said, in the same low voice. "You have been trained to evaluate facts. All I ask is that you use that training.

Now, let's get in there before Tovarishch Artomonov begins to think we might be stalling him."

Condley strode toward the door and grasped the knob with a firm hand. Sam Bending followed, wondering. Artomonov? Who was Artomonov? The Secretary of Economics had indicated, by his precise enunciation of tovarishch, that the man was a Russian—or at least a citizen of one of the Soviet satellites. Sam Bending took a deep breath and decided that he was prepared for almost anything.

There were four men seated around the conference table in the back room, and the most surprising thing, as far as Sam was concerned, was that he recognized only one of them. From the big buildup, he had had half a notion that the President himself might be there.

"Mr. Samson Bending, gentlemen," said Secretary Condley to the group. They all rose and made half-hearted attempts to smile, but Sam could see that they were watching him as though he had a live grenade in his pocket.

"Mr. Bending, I believe you know Mr. Richard Olcott," the Secretary said.

Bending gave the Power Utilities executive a sardonic smile, which was returned by a solemn nod of the head.

Sure I know you, you crook, Bending thought.

"And, around the table," Condley continued, "are Dr. Edward Larchmont, the research departmental head of Power Utilities—Dr. Stefan Vanderlin, of the United States Bureau of Standards—and Dr. Alexis Andreevich Artomonov, of the Soviet Socialist Republics' representative office at the United Nations."

Sam Bending managed not to blink in astonishment as the last man was introduced—a feat which took every milligram of his self-possession. He recognized the name; A. A. Artomonov, head of the United Nation's International Trade Bureau. What was he doing here?

"If you'll sit down, Mr. Bending," Condley was saying, "we can get to business."

Bending sat down, and the others sat with him. "May I say something before we go any further?" Sam Bending asked. "May I say that I think this is a rather irregular method of doing things and that I think I ought to see my lawyer."

Secretary Condley's eyes narrowed just the slightest. He was a heavy, jowl-faced, graying man who was known for his firmness in his official capacity. "At this stage of the game, Mr. Bending, there is no need for a lawyer. We merely want to explain something to you—we want you to get all the data. If, afterwards, you still want your lawyer, you'll be perfectly free to call him. Right now, we want you to listen with an open mind."

Bending thought it over. "All right. Go ahead."

"Very well. First, I'll agree that all this may seem a bit high-handed. But time was—and is—getting short." He glanced at Olcott, and the glance was not all friendliness. "The Government was notified about this almost too late; we have had to act fast. Almost too fast."

"I notified the Government as soon as I was sure of my facts," Olcott said, completely unflustered.

"That's as may be," Condley said. "The point is that we now have the problem on our hands, and we must find an equitable solution." He took a gold fountain pen from his pocket, and his strong, thick fingers began toying with it while his eyes remained on Sam Bending. "The fact that you have applied for a patent makes it imperative that we get the situation under control immediately."

Before Sam could answer, there was a knock on the outer door that came clearly into the rear room. Secretary Condley rose without saying a word and went out.

Dr. Larchmont, the Power Utilities physicist, decided to make small talk to bridge the hiatus. "That's a really beautiful piece of machinery you've built, Mr. Bending. Really remarkable." He was a small, flat-faced man with a fringe of dark hair around his otherwise naked scalp.

Sam looked a little startled. "You mean you opened a Converter up?"

Larchmont nodded. "I presume you are referring to the fusing device. We X-rayed the thing thoroughly before we opened it. These days, many devices are rigged to be self-destroying, but that, in itself is a specialized field. Most of them are traps that are rather easy to get around if one is expecting them and knows how to handle them. But the Converter itself, if I may say so, is one of the most original and elegant devices I have seen in many a day."

"Thanks," said Bending, with a touch of bitterness in his voice. "I—"

The door opened at that moment, and Secretary Condley came in followed by a tall, round-faced man with dark wavy hair and clear brown eyes.

"Jim!" Sam said in surprise.

The man was James Luckman, Sam Bending's business manager. "Hello, Sam. What's this all about? The FBI men who picked me up said I wasn't under arrest, but I had a hunch it was about as close as you can come without actual arrest."

Sam nodded. "Funny—I had that impression, too." He looked at Condley. "What's the idea, Condley? Jim doesn't know anything about this."

The Secretary managed to look unoffended at Bending's tone. "Possibly not. We can't be sure, of course, but—frankly, I'd be willing to accept your word." He paused. "But—you're not a businessman, Mr. Bending?" He made it only half a question.

"No. I leave that sort of thing up to Jim. Oh, I don't say I'm completely ignorant of the field; it's just that I'm not particularly interested, that's all. Why should I be?" He went on, half belligerently. "I've known and trusted Jim for years. He knows his business; I know my science. I know enough to be able to check the account books, and he knows enough to be able to understand a technical report. Right, Jim?"

Luckman looked bewildered. "Sure, Sam. But what's all this leading up to? I don't get it." He frowned suddenly. "Has someone accused me of cheating you?"

"No, no, no," Condley said rapidly. "Of course not. Nothing like that." He looked sharply at Luckman. "Do you know anything about the Converter?"

Jim Luckman glanced at Bending before replying. Bending's face remained expressionless. "Go ahead, Jim," he said, "square with him."

Luckman spread his hands. "I know that Sam was working on something he called a Converter. I don't know anything more about it than that. Sam keeps his ideas secret until he gets them to a marketable stage, which is all right with me. I have enough work to do, handling the stuff he's already patented, without worrying about anything that isn't salable yet. So?"

Condley nodded, then gestured toward a chair. "Sit down, Mr. Luckman. Do you know these other gentlemen?" he asked rhetorically. He proceeded to introduce the others. Sam Bending noted with satisfaction that Luckman looked rather puzzled when the Russian was introduced.

Condley himself sat down again, and said: "Well, we're all here. We're not going to make this formal, gentlemen, but I hope it won't develop into a heated argument, either. Let's try to keep our tempers."

"First, as to the Converter itself. We all know, with the possible exception of Mr. Luckman, what it does, but for his benefit, we'll go over that. The Converter, by means of what Dr. Larchmont has been wont to call 'a very elegant method', produces electrical power directly from the fusion of hydrogen into helium. A pilot model, with a total volume of a little more than one and one-quarter cubic feet, is capable of turning out up to five hundred horsepower, either DC or AC in a wide range of frequencies. The voltage can be regulated from zero to one thousand volts by simply setting a dial.

"The device is powered by using ordinary water as fuel. At full capacity, the Converter consumes approximately four hundred milligrams of water per hour, which can easily be drawn from the moisture of the air. The machine is thus self-fueling.

"Since the nuclear energy released is converted almost one hundred per cent into electrical current, there is no danger from radiation; since the process is, by its very nature, self-limiting, there is no danger of explosion. The worst that can happen is for the machine to burn out, and, I understand, it won't do that un-

less it is purposely tampered with to make it do so.

"Finally, the device is so inexpensive to produce that it could be sold for about one-quarter of the price of an ordinary automobile." He stopped, cleared his throat, and glanced at Larchmont and Vanderlin. "Am I essentially correct, gentlemen?"

Larchmont nodded, and Vanderlin said, "That's about it."

Jim Luckman looked at Sam Bending in open admiration. "Wow," he said softly. "You're quite a genius, Sam."

"Very well, gentlemen," Condley continued, "we know what this device will do on a physical level. Now we must consider what it will do on an economic level. Have you considered what would happen if you put the Converter on the market, Mr. Bending?"

"Certainly," Bending said, with an angry glance at Olcott. "The Power Utilities would lose their pants. So what? I figure that any company which tries to steal and suppress inventions deserves a licking."

Secretary Condley glanced at Olcott as though he were trying to hold back a smile, then returned his gaze to Bending. "We won't quibble over the ethics of the situation, Mr. Bending. You are correct in saying that Power Utilities would be bankrupt. They couldn't stand the competition of what amounts to almost unlimited free power. And then what would happen, with every power company in the United States suddenly put out of business?"

Sam looked puzzled. "What difference would it make? People would just be getting their power from another source, that's all."

Richard Olcott leaned forward earnestly. "May I interject something here? I know you are angry with me, Mr. Bending—perhaps with good reason. But I'd like to point out something that you might not have recognized. Public Utilities and its co-operative independent companies are not owned by individuals. Much of the stock is owned by small share-holders who have only a few shares each. The several billion dollars that these companies are worth is spread out over the nation, not just centered with a few wealthy men. In addition, a great many shares are held by insurance companies and banks. Literally millions of people would lose money—just as surely as if it had been stolen from them—if this device went on the market."

Bending frowned. He hadn't thought of it in exactly that way. "Still," he said tentatively, "didn't blacksmiths and buggy-whip manufacturers and horse-breeders lose money after World War I?"

"Not to this extent," Olcott said, shaking his head. "This is not 1918, Mr. Bending. Sixty years ago, our economy was based on gold, not, as it is today on production and manpower, centered in the vast interlocking web of American industry."

Condley said: "Mr. Olcott said a moment ago that millions of people would lose money just as surely as if it had been stolen from them. I think it would be more proper to say that the money will be destroyed, not stolen. A thief, after all, does put money back into circulation after he steals it. But when vast amounts of wealth are suddenly removed from circulation completely, the economic balance is disastrously upset."

Sam Bending was still frowning. His grandfather had been a small businessman in 1929—not fabulously wealthy, but certainly well off by the social standards of the day. Two years later, in 1931, he was broke, wiped out completely, happy and eager to accept any odd job he could get to support his family.

Sam's father had had to leave school during the Thirties and go to work in order to bring in enough money to keep the family going. Grandfather Bending, weakened by long hours of labor that he was physically unfit for, had become an invalid, and the entire support of the family had devolved upon Sam's father.

He could remember his dad talking about the breadlines and the free-soup kitchens. He could remember his grandmother, her hands crippled by arthritis, aggravated by long hours at a commercial sewing machine in a clothing center sweat-shop, just so she could bring in that little extra money that meant so much to her children and her invalid husband.

Could one invention bring all that back again? Could his own harmless-looking Converter plunge millions back into that kind of misery? It seemed hardly possible, but Sam couldn't banish the specter of the Great Depression from his mind.

"Just how far-reaching would this economic upset be?" he asked Condley.

Condley had taken out his gold fountain pen again and was rolling it between his palms. "Well, that's a question with a long answer, Mr. Bending. Let's begin small and watch it spread.

"Banks are pretty safe today, aren't they? The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation insures all depositors for deposits up to twenty thousand dollars now. A bank is hedged in by so many legal fences that it is almost impossible for one to fail in the same way that they failed all over the country in the early Thirties. Even if one does fail, through the gross mismanagement or illegal activities of its governing board, the depositors don't get excited; they know they're covered. There hasn't been a really disastrous run on a bank for more than thirty years.

"But banks don't just keep their money in vaults; they invest it. And a significantly large percentage of that money is invested in power companies all over the nation. In an attempt to keep their heads above water, those banks would be forced to make up tremendous losses if Power Utilities failed overnight. It would force them to draw in outstanding loans for ready cash. It would mean turning in United States Savings Bonds, which would put a tremendous strain on the Govern-

ment.

"In spite of that, most banks won't be able to stay solvent because their other capital investments will be dropping rapidly in value. As Mr. Olcott said, our monetary system isn't based on gold, but on production and goods. If Power Utilities and its members fail, you and your machine will have destroyed—made worthless—several billion dollars worth of machinery and equipment. You will have thrown tens of thousands of people out of work. You will have cut the underpinnings from beneath the American dollar.

"And it won't stop there. What will happen to the companies that build the dynamos and the boilers and the atomic plants for the power companies? What will happen to the copper industry when the need for millions of miles of copper wire vanishes? They will all suffer tremendous setbacks, throwing tens of thousands more out of work and lowering the value of their stock drastically.

"The banks, then, will find their investments suddenly worth only a fraction of their former value. They'll fail wholesale. And you can see what that will do to the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation and other insurance companies."

Sam Bending nodded slowly. He could see that. Insurance companies base their business on the prediction that a certain event—death, accident, or the failure of a bank—will happen to a certain percentage of their covered clients, and they adjust their rates accordingly. But something that would change a five-percent-failure rate to a fifty-percent-failure rate would break the company.

And the unemployment rate would go up even higher. And Sam thought of something the Secretary hadn't even mentioned. State and Federal Unemployment Insurance. What would that drain do to the treasuries of the various governments involved?

Sam Bending felt as if the thing were snowballing on him. Where would the State and Federal Governments get that money? Taxes? Don't be silly. How can you collect sales taxes when sales are dropping off because of unemployment? How can you get income taxes from depleted incomes? How can you charge luxury taxes when no one is buying luxuries?

Certainly essentials like food, rent, and clothing couldn't be taxed. People would buy as cheaply as possible, which would force down prices. Which would—

"Where would it go from there?" Sam asked Condley in a shaken voice.

Condley glanced over at the Russian. "I believe Dr. Artomonov can answer that one for you."

Artomonov was a red-faced, fleshy man with almost no hair and a huge, bristling, gray mustache. His eyes were a startling blue. "Mr. Bending," he said in excellent English, "you may recall that your depression of the Thirties was not confined to America. All of Europe became involved. The same will happen again, to a greater degree, if your machine is released to the world at this time." He

brushed at his mustache with a fingertip.

"You may wonder what I am doing here, Mr. Bending. You might think that the traditional rivalry which has existed between our countries for so many decades would preclude my being admitted to such a secret session as this one. I might have thought so, too, fifteen years ago. But when something threatens both our countries, the picture changes. We fought together during the Motherland War—what you call World War II—because of the common threat of German Nazi terrorism. We co-operated to suppress the brush-fires that threatened us in Europe and the Middle East during the so-called Tense War. In big things we must co-operate.

"Again we are both threatened by a common source, Mr. Bending, and again we must co-operate."

Sam Bending felt a chill. The thought that he and his machine were a threat as great as that, a threat to the two greatest nations of Earth, was appalling.

"I am not a scientist, Mr. Bending," the Russian went on. "My title comes from a degree in economics and political science, not in physical science. As soon as this machine was demonstrated to me, however, I could appreciate its power—not only physically, but economically. I immediately contacted my superiors in Moscow to discuss the problem.

"Naturally, we would like to know the ... ah ... 'elegant' principle behind its operation. Equally naturally"—he smiled politely at Secretary Condley—"you will not tell us. However, my superiors in Moscow assure me that we need not worry on that score; a machine identically similar to yours was invented by one of our brilliant young scientists at the University of Moscow over four years ago. As a patriot, of course, he was willing to have the machine suppressed, and no news of it has leaked out."

Sam Bending found it difficult to keep from smiling. Sure, he thought, and a man named Popov invented radio, and Yablochkov invented the electric light.

"You see, Mr. Bending," Dr Artomonov continued, "while we do not have the unstable setup of money-based capitalism, and while we do not need to worry about such antiquated and dangerous things as fluctuating stock markets, we would still find your machine a threat. Communism is based on the work of the people; our economy is based on the labor of the working man. It is thus stable, because every man must work.

"But we, too, have a vast, power network, the destruction of which would cause the unemployment of millions of our citizens. The unemployment alone would cause repercussions all over the Soviet Republics which would be difficult to deal with. We would eventually recover, of course, because of the inherent stability of our system, but the shock would not be good for us.

"The same thing would happen in every industrialized nation on Earth,"

Artomonov went on. "In my work with the United Nations, I have studied just such problems. European governments would fall overnight. In Germany, in the 1920s, it was cheaper to burn bundles of one-mark notes than it was to buy firewood with them. Such things will be repeated, not only in the Germanies, but all over Europe.

"Some countries, of course, will not be so drastically effected. China, and other parts of Asia which have not built up a vast industrial system, will be affected only slightly. The South American countries still have a more or less agricultural economy and will not be bothered greatly.

"But the great industrial civilizations of East and West will collapse."

With one breath, Artomonov was saying that the Soviet Union could weather the storm, and with another he was hinting that it probably wouldn't. But Sam Bending could see the point in spite of the Russian's tortuous logic.

"I think that is all I have to say for the moment," Artomonov said, "except to emphasize one point. The Great Depression hit the world some fifty years ago. It was a terrible thing for everyone concerned. But it was as nothing at all—a mere zephyr of ill wind—compared to what the Depression of the Eighties will be if your machine goes on the market."

There was silence for a minute. Sam Bending was thinking hard, and the others could see it—and they knew there was no point in interrupting at that moment.

"Just a second," Sam said. "There's one thing that I don't really quite see. I can see that the situation you outline would develop if every power plant in America—or in the Soviet Union or Europe—were to be suddenly replaced by Converters. I can see that chaos would result." He paused, marshaling his thoughts, then went on, with a tinge of anger in his voice.

"But that's not the way it will work! You can't do a thing like that overnight. To mass produce the Converter will take time—factories will have to be tooled up for it, and all that. And distribution will take time. It seems to me that there would be plenty of time to adjust."

Condley started to say something, but Dr. Artomonov burst in explosively.

"Don't you see, Mr. Bending? The threat of the machine is enough! Even here in your own country, just the knowledge that such machines were to be made at some time in the immediate future would have a disastrous effect! Who would invest in Power Utilities if they knew that within a short time it would be bankrupt? No one would want to buy such stock, and those who had it would be frantically trying to sell what they had. The effect on the banking system would be the same as if the machine were already being used. Your Mr. Roosevelt pointed out that fear was the problem."

Bending frowned puzzledly. "I don't see—"

He was interrupted by Dr. Larchmont. "Let me see if I can't give you an analogy, Mr. Bending. Do you know anything about the so-called 'nerve gases'?"

"Some," admitted Sam. "Most of them aren't gases; they're finely dispersed aerosols."

Larchmont nodded. "Have you any idea how much it takes to kill a man?"

"A drop or so of the aerosol on the skin is enough, I understand."

"That's right. Now, how can such a minute amount of poison damage a human being?"

Bending began to get a glimmer of what the man was driving at. "Well, I know that some of them suppress the enzymic action with acetylcholine, which means that the nerves simply act as though their synapses had been shorted through. It only takes a small percentage of that kind of damage to the nerve fibers to ruin the whole nervous system. The signals get jammed up and confused, and the whole mechanism ceases to function. The victim dies."

Larchmont nodded. "Now, as I understand it, our banking system is the vital nerve network of our economy. And our system is built on credit—faith, if you will. Destroy that faith—even a small percentage of it—and you destroy the system.

"If your machine were to go on the market, there would be no more faith in the present utilities system. Their stocks would be worthless long before your machine actually put them out of business. And that would hit our banking system the same way a nerve gas hits the nervous system. And the victim—the American economy—would die. And the nation, as a nation, would die with it."

"I see," said Bending slowly. He didn't like the picture at all; it was more frightening than he cared to admit, even to himself. He looked at his business manager. "What do you think, Jim?" he asked softly. He knew he could depend on Luckman.

Jim Luckman looked worried. "They're right, Sam. Clean, dead right. I know the investment pattern in this country, and I have an idea of what it must be abroad. This country would be in the middle of the worst depression in its history. At least we had Federal help during the Thirties—but there won't even be a United States Government if this hits. Nor, I think, will there be a Soviet government, in spite of what Dr. Artomonov's personal beliefs may be."

Significantly, the Russian economist said nothing.

Sam Bending closed his eyes. "I've worked on this thing for years," he said tensely. "It was ... it means something to me. I invented it. I perfected it." His voice began to quaver just a little. "But if it's going to do ... to do all that—" He paused and took a deep breath. "All right. I'll smash my apparatus and destroy my plans and forget about it."

Jim Luckman looked at Secretary Condley. "I don't think that would be fair. Sam's worked hard on this thing. He deserves recognition. And the people of Earth deserve to get this machine somehow. Can't something be worked out?"

"Certainly," said Condley. "In some countries, and in some eras, dangerous inventions were suppressed by the simplest method. If it was discovered in time, the inventor was executed summarily, along with anyone else who knew the secret, and the invention was destroyed. The United States isn't that kind of country." He looked down at his hands and the gold pen again before he went on.

"Please don't misunderstand, Mr. Bending; we are not trying to keep the Converter under wraps forever. In the first place, I don't think it would be possible. What do you think, Dr. Vanderlin?"

The Bureau of Standards man said: "I doubt it. Granted, the Converter is not something one would accidentally stumble across, nor automatically deduce from the 'previous state of the art'. I'll admit frankly that I doubt if I would ever have thought of it. But I doubt gravely that it is so unique that it will never be rediscovered independently."

"So," said Condley, "we have no intent to hold it back on that score. And, in the second place, such an invention is too valuable to allow it to be lost.

"So here is our proposition. You will sell your rights to the Converter to Power Utilities. It won't even be patented in the usual sense; we can't allow the Converter to become public property at this time. We can't make it possible for just anyone to send in a quarter to the Patent Office to find out how it works. That's why we stopped the patent application.

"But the Government will see that a contract is written up which admits that you are the inventor of the Converter, and which will give you royalties on every unit built. High royalties.

"Under strict Government supervision, Power Utilities will proceed to liquidate their holdings—slowly, so that there will be no repercussions on an economic level. The danger lies, not in the Converter's replacing existing power equipment, but in the danger of its replacing them too quickly. But with care and control, the adjustment can be made slowly. The process will take about ten years, but you will receive a lump sum, plus a monthly payment, as an advance against future royalties."

"I see," said Bending slowly. "That sounds all right to me. What about you, Jim? What do you think?"

Jim Luckman was smiling again. "Sounds fine to me, Sam. We'll have to work out the terms of the contract, of course, but I think Mr. Olcott and I can see eye to eye."

Olcott seemed to wince a little. He knew he was over a barrel.

"I suppose I'll have to be sworn to secrecy, eh?" Bending asked. He was

beginning to recover his poise.

Condley nodded. "You will." He made his characteristic pause, looking down at the gold pen and back up. "Mr. Bending, don't think that this is the first time this has happened. Yours is not the first dangerous invention that has come up. It just so happens that it's the most dangerous so far. We don't like to have to work this way, but we must. There was simply nothing else to do."

Sam Bending leaned back in his chair. "That's all right. To be perfectly honest, there are a lot of details that I still don't understand. But I recognize the fact that I'm simply not an economist; I can see the broad outlines plainly enough."

Dr. Artomonov smiled widely. "I do not understand the details of your machine, either, Mr. Bending, but I understand the broad outlines of its operations well enough to be frightened when I think of what it could do to world economy if it were to be dumped on the market at this time. I am happy to see that America, as well as Mother Russia, can produce patriots of a high order."

Sam gave him a smile. "Thanks." He didn't know quite what else to say to a statement like that. "But Jim, here, is going to spend the next several days trotting out facts and figures for me. I want to see just what would take place, if I can wrestle with that kind of data."

"Oh, brother!" said Jim Luckman softly. "Well, I'll try."

"I'll have the reports from the computers sent to you," Condley offered. "They show the whole collapse, step by step."

Artomonov cast a speculative glance in Condley's direction, but he said nothing.

"There's one other thing," Sam said flatly. "The Converter is my baby, and I want to go on working on it. I think Power Utilities might put me on as a permanent consultant, so that I could earn some of the money that's coming in over the next ten years. That way, my royalties won't suffer so much from the advance payments."

Jim Luckman grinned, and Richard Olcott said: "I thought you said you were no businessman, Mr. Bending."

"I may be ignorant," said Sam, "but I'm not stupid. What about it?"

Olcott glanced at Dr. Larchmont. The little scientist was beaming.

"Definitely," he said. "I want Mr. Bending to show me how he managed to dope that thing out. And, to be perfectly frank, there are a couple of things in there that I don't get at all."

"That's understandable," said Dr. Vanderlin. "We only had a few hours to look at the thing. Still, I must admit it's a lulu."

"That's not what I meant," Larchmont said. "There are some things in there that would take a long time to figure out without an explanation. I'll admit that—"

"Wait a minute," Bending interrupted. "You said 'a few hours', Dr. Vanderlin. You mean only since this morning?" He grinned. "What happened to the one you got Friday night? Did my fusing device work the first time?"

Vanderlin looked puzzledly at Larchmont. Larchmont said wonderingly: "Friday? You mean you had two pilot models?"

Olcott said: "Where was the other? We checked your power drain and saw you weren't using any at your house, so—"

"I had three models," Bending said. "I've got one left in my car; you took one from my house, and the third was taken from my lab sometime Friday night. Somebody has it ..."

Condley said: "Dr. Artomonov, do you know anything about this?"

The Russian shook his head. "Nothing." He looked plainly frightened. "I assure you, my government knew nothing of this."

Condley leaped to his feet, said: "Where are those FBI men?" and ran out the door.

"The black market," said Bending softly. "They found out somehow."

"And they've had three days to study it," Larchmont said. "It's too late now. That thing is probably somewhere in South America by this time."

Artomonov stood up, his face oddly pale. "You must excuse me, gentlemen. I must get in touch with Moscow immediately." He strode out of the room.

The four men remaining in the room just stared at each other for a long moment. There wasn't much else they could do.

DAY OF THE MORON

There were still, in 1968, a few people who were afraid of the nuclear power plant. Oldsters, in whom the term "atomic energy" produced semantic reactions associated with Hiroshima. Those who saw, in the towering steam-column above it, a tempting target for enemy—which still meant Soviet—bombers and guided missiles. Some of the Central Intelligence and F.B.I. people, who realized how futile even the most elaborate security measures were against a resourceful and suicidally determined saboteur. And a minority of engineers and nuclear physicists who remained unpersuaded that accidental blowups at nuclear-reaction plants were impossible.

Scott Melroy was among these last. He knew, as a matter of fact, that there had been several nasty, meticulously unpublicized, near-catastrophes at the Long Island Nuclear Reaction Plant, all involving the new Doernberg-Giardano breeder-reactors, and that there had been considerable carefully-hushed top-level acrimony before the Melroy Engineering Corporation had been given the contract to install the fully cybernetic control system intended to prevent a recurrence of such incidents.

That had been three months ago. Melroy and his people had moved in, been assigned sections of a couple of machine shops, set up an assembly shop and a set of plyboard-partitioned offices in a vacant warehouse just outside the reactor area, and tried to start work, only to run into the almost interminable procedural disputes and jurisdictional wranglings of the sort which he privately labeled "bureau bunk". It was only now that he was ready to begin work on the reactors.

He sat at his desk, in the inner of three successively smaller offices on the second floor of the converted warehouse, checking over a symbolic-logic analysis of a relay system and, at the same time, sharpening a pencil, his knife paring off tiny feathery shavings of wood. He was a tall, sparely-built, man of indeterminate age, with thinning sandy hair, a long Gaelic upper lip, and a wide, half-humorous, half-weary mouth; he wore an open-necked shirt, and an old and shabby leather jacket, to the left shoulder of which a few clinging flecks of paint showed where some military emblem had been, long ago. While his fingers worked with

the jackknife and his eyes traveled over the page of closely-written symbols, his mind was reviewing the eight different ways in which one of the efficient but treacherous Doernberg-Giardano reactors could be allowed to reach critical mass, and he was wondering if there might not be some unsuspected ninth way. That was a possibility which always lurked in the back of his mind, and lately it had been giving him surrealistic nightmares.

"Mr. Melroy!" the box on the desk in front of him said suddenly, in a feminine voice. "Mr. Melroy, Dr. Rives is here."

Melroy picked up the handphone, thumbing on the switch.

"Dr. Rives?" he repeated.

"The psychologist who's subbing for Dr. von Heydenreich," the box told him patiently.

"Oh, yes. Show him in," Melroy said.

"Right away, Mr. Melroy," the box replied.

Replacing the handphone, Melroy wondered, for a moment, why there had been a hint of suppressed amusement in his secretary's voice. Then the door opened and he stopped wondering. Dr. Rives wasn't a him; she was a her. Very attractive looking her, too—dark hair and eyes, rather long-oval features, clear, lightly tanned complexion, bright red lipstick put on with a micrometric exactitude that any engineer could appreciate. She was tall, within four inches of his own six-foot mark, and she wore a black tailored outfit, perfectly plain, which had probably cost around five hundred dollars and would have looked severe and mannish except that the figure under it curved and bulged in just the right places and to just the right degree.

Melroy rose, laying down knife and pencil and taking his pipe out of his mouth.

"Good afternoon," he greeted. "Dr. von Heydenreich gave me quite a favorable account of you—as far as it went. He might have included a few more data and made it more so.... Won't you sit down?"

The woman laid her handbag on the desk and took the visitor's chair, impish mirth sparking in her eyes.

"He probably omitted mentioning that the D. is for Doris," she suggested. "Suppose I'd been an Englishman with a name like Evelyn or Vivian?"

Melroy tried to visualize her as a male Englishman named Vivian, gave up, and grinned at her.

"Let this be a lesson," he said. "Inferences are to be drawn from objects, or descriptions of objects; never from verbal labels. Do you initial your first name just to see how people react when they meet you?"

"Well, no, though that's an amusing and sometimes instructive by-product.

It started when I began contributing to some of the professional journals. There's still a little of what used to be called male sex-chauvinism among my colleagues, and some who would be favorably impressed with an article signed D. Warren Rives might snort in contempt at the same article signed Doris Rives."

"Well, fortunately, Dr. von Heydenreich isn't one of those," Melroy said. "How is the Herr Doktor, by the way, and just what happened to him? Miss Kourtakides merely told me that he'd been injured and was in a hospital in Pittsburgh."

"The Herr Doktor got shot," Doris Rives informed him. "With a charge of BB's, in a most indelicate portion of his anatomy. He was out hunting, the last day of small-game season, and somebody mistook him for a turkey. Nothing really serious, but he's face down in bed, cursing hideously in German, English, Russian, Italian and French, mainly because he's missing deer hunting."

"I might have known it," Melroy said in disgust. "The ubiquitous lame-brain with a dangerous mechanism.... I suppose he briefed you on what I want done, here?"

"Well, not too completely. I gathered that you want me to give intelligence tests, or aptitude tests, or something of the sort, to some of your employees. I'm not really one of these so-called industrial anthropologists," she explained. "Most of my work, for the past few years, has been for public-welfare organizations, with subnormal persons. I told him that, and he said that was why he selected me. He said one other thing. He said, 'I used to think Melroy had an obsession about fools; well, after stopping this load of shot, I'm beginning to think it's a good subject to be obsessed about.'"

Melroy nodded. "'Obsession' will probably do. 'Phobia' would be more exact. I'm afraid of fools, and the chance that I have one working for me, here, affects me like having a cobra crawling around my bedroom in the dark. I want you to locate any who might be in a gang of new men I've had to hire, so that I can get rid of them."

"And just how do you define the term 'fool', Mr. Melroy?" she asked. "Remember, it has no standard meaning. Republicans apply it to Democrats, and vice versa."

"Well, I apply it to people who do things without considering possible consequences. People who pepper distinguished Austrian psychologists in the pants-seat with turkey-shot, for a starter. Or people who push buttons to see what'll happen, or turn valves and twiddle with dial-knobs because they have nothing else to do with their hands. Or shoot insulators off power lines to see if they can hit them. People who don't know it's loaded. People who think warning signs are purely ornamental. People who play practical jokes. People who—"

"I know what you mean. Just day-before-yesterday, I saw a woman toss a

cocktail into an electric heater. She didn't want to drink it, and she thought it would just go up in steam. The result was slightly spectacular."

"Next time, she won't do that. She'll probably throw her drink into a lead-ladle, if there's one around. Well, on a statistical basis, I'd judge that I have three or four such dud rounds among this new gang I've hired. I want you to put the finger on them, so I can bounce them before they blow the whole plant up, which could happen quite easily."

"That," Doris Rives said, "is not going to be as easy as it sounds. Ordinary intelligence-testing won't be enough. The woman I was speaking of has an I.Q. well inside the meaning of normal intelligence. She just doesn't use it."

"Sure." Melroy got a thick folder out of his desk and handed it across. "Heydenreich thought of that, too. He got this up for me, about five years ago. The intelligence test is based on the new French Sûreté test for mentally deficient criminals. Then there's a memory test, and tests for judgment and discrimination, semantic reactions, temperamental and emotional makeup, and general mental attitude."

She took the folder and leafed through it. "Yes, I see. I always liked this Sûreté test. And this memory test is a honey—'One hen, two ducks, three squawking geese, four corpulent porpoises, five Limerick oysters, six pairs of Don Alfonso tweezers....' I'd like to see some of these memory-course boys trying to make visual images of six pairs of Don Alfonso tweezers. And I'm going to make a copy of this word-association list. It's really a semantic reaction test; Korzybski would have loved it. And, of course, our old friend, the Rorschach Ink-Blots. I've always harbored the impious suspicion that you can prove almost anything you want to with that. But these question-suggestions for personal interview are really crafty. Did Heydenreich get them up himself?"

"Yes. And we have stacks and stacks of printed forms for the written portion of the test, and big cards to summarize each subject on. And we have a disk-recorder to use in the oral tests. There'll have to be a pretty complete record of each test, in case—"

The office door opened and a bulky man with a black mustache entered, beating the snow from his overcoat with a battered porkpie hat and commenting blasphemously on the weather. He advanced into the room until he saw the woman in the chair beside the desk, and then started to back out.

"Come on in, Sid," Melroy told him. "Dr. Rives, this is our general foreman, Sid Keating. Sid, Dr. Rives, the new dimwit detector. Sid's in direct charge of personnel," he continued, "so you two'll be working together quite a bit."

"Glad to know you, doctor," Keating said. Then he turned to Melroy. "Scott, you're really going through with this, then?" he asked. "I'm afraid we'll have trouble, then."

"Look, Sid," Melroy said. "We've been all over that. Once we start work on the reactors, you and Ned Puryear and Joe Ricci and Steve Chalmers can't be everywhere at once. A cybernetic system will only do what it's been assembled to do, and if some quarter-wit assembles one of these things wrong—" He left the sentence dangling; both men knew what he meant.

Keating shook his head. "This union's going to bawl like a branded calf about it," he predicted. "And if any of the dear sirs and brothers get washed out—" That sentence didn't need to be completed, either.

"We have a right," Melroy said, "to discharge any worker who is, quote, of unsound mind, deficient mentality or emotional instability, unquote. It says so right in our union contract, in nice big print."

"Then they'll claim the tests are wrong."

"I can't see how they can do that," Doris Rives put in, faintly scandalized.

"Neither can I, and they probably won't either," Keating told her. "But they'll go ahead and do it. Why, Scott, they're pulling the Number One Doernberg-Giardano, tonight. By oh-eight-hundred, it ought to be cool enough to work on. Where will we hold the tests? Here?"

"We'll have to, unless we can get Dr. Rives security-cleared." Melroy turned to her. "Were you ever security-cleared by any Government agency?"

"Oh, yes. I was with Armed Forces Medical, Psychiatric Division, in Indonesia in '62 and '63, and I did some work with mental fatigue cases at Tonto Basin Research Establishment in '64."

Melroy looked at her sharply. Keating whistled.

"If she could get into Tonto Basin, she can get in here," he declared.

"I should think so. I'll call Colonel Bradshaw, the security officer."

"That way, we can test them right on the job," Keating was saying. "Take them in relays. I'll talk to Ben about it, and we'll work up some kind of a schedule." He turned to Doris Rives. "You'll need a wrist-Geiger, and a dosimeter. We'll furnish them," he told her. "I hope they don't try to make you carry a pistol, too."

"A pistol?" For a moment, she must have thought he was using some technical-jargon term, and then it dawned on her that he wasn't. "You mean—?" She cocked her thumb and crooked her index finger.

"Yeah. A rod. Roscoe. The Equalizer. We all have to." He half-lifted one out of his side pocket. "We're all United States deputy marshals. They don't bother much with counterespionage, here, but they don't fool when it comes to countersabotage. Well, I'll get an order cut and posted. Be seeing you, doctor."

"You think the union will make trouble about these tests?" she asked, after the general foreman had gone out.

"They're sure to," Melroy replied. "Here's the situation. I have about fifty of

my own men, from Pittsburgh, here, but they can't work on the reactors because they don't belong to the Industrial Federation of Atomic Workers, and I can't just pay their initiation fees and union dues and get union cards for them, because admission to this union is on an annual quota basis, and this is December, and the quota's full. So I have to use them outside the reactor area, on fabrication and assembly work. And I have to hire through the union, and that's handled on a membership seniority basis, so I have to take what's thrown at me. That's why I was careful to get that clause I was quoting to Sid written into my contract.

"Now, here's what's going to happen. Most of the men'll take the test without protest, but a few of them'll raise the roof about it. Nothing burns a moron worse than to have somebody question his fractional intelligence. The odds are that the ones that yell the loudest about taking the test will be the ones who get scrubbed out, and when the test shows that they're deficient, they won't believe it. A moron simply cannot conceive of his being anything less than perfectly intelligent, any more than a lunatic can conceive of his being less than perfectly sane. So they'll claim we're framing them, for an excuse to fire them. And the union will have to back them up, right or wrong, at least on the local level. That goes without saying. In any dispute, the employer is always wrong and the worker is always right, until proven otherwise. And that takes a lot of doing, believe me!"

"Well, if they're hired through the union, on a seniority basis, wouldn't they be likely to be experienced and competent workers?" she asked.

"Experienced, yes. That is, none of them has ever been caught doing anything downright calamitous ... yet," Melroy replied. "The moron I'm afraid of can go on for years, doing routine work under supervision, and nothing'll happen. Then, some day, he does something on his own lame-brained initiative, and when he does, it's only at the whim of whatever gods there be that the result isn't a wholesale catastrophe. And people like that are the most serious threat facing our civilization today, atomic war not excepted."

Dr. Doris Rives lifted a delicately penciled eyebrow over that. Melroy, pausing to relight his pipe, grinned at her.

"You think that's the old obsession talking?" he asked. "Could be. But look at this plant, here. It generates every kilowatt of current used between Trenton and Albany, the New York metropolitan area included. Except for a few little storage-battery or Diesel generator systems, that couldn't handle one tenth of one per cent of the barest minimum load, it's been the only source of electric current here since 1962, when the last coal-burning power plant was dismantled. Knock this plant out and you darken every house and office and factory and street in the area. You immobilize the elevators—think what that would mean in lower and midtown Manhattan alone. And the subways. And the new endless-belt conveyors that handle eighty per cent of the city's freight traffic. And the railroads—there

aren't a dozen steam or Diesel locomotives left in the whole area. And the pump stations for water and gas and fuel oil. And seventy per cent of the space-heating is electric, now. Why, you can't imagine what it'd be like. It's too gigantic. But what you can imagine would be a nightmare.

"You know, it wasn't so long ago, when every home lighted and heated itself, and every little industry was a self-contained unit, that a fool couldn't do great damage unless he inherited a throne or was placed in command of an army, and that didn't happen nearly as often as our leftist social historians would like us to think. But today, everything we depend upon is centralized, and vulnerable to blunder-damage. Even our food—remember that poisoned soft-drink horror in Chicago, in 1963; three thousand hospitalized and six hundred dead because of one man's stupid mistake at a bottling plant." He shook himself slightly, as though to throw off some shadow that had fallen over him, and looked at his watch. "Sixteen hundred. How did you get here? Fly your own plane?"

"No; I came by T.W.A. from Pittsburgh. I have a room at the new Midtown City hotel, on Forty-seventh Street: I had my luggage sent on there from the airport and came out on the Long Island subway."

"Fine. I have a room at Midtown City, myself, though I sleep here about half the time." He nodded toward a door on the left. "Suppose we go in and have dinner together. This cafeteria, here, is a horrible place. It's run by a dietitian instead of a chef, and everything's so white-enamel antiseptic that I swear I smell belladonna-icthyol ointment every time I go in the place. Wait here till I change clothes."

At the Long Island plant, no one was concerned about espionage—neither the processes nor the equipment used there were secret—but the countersabotage security was fantastically thorough. Every person or scrap of material entering the reactor area was searched; the life-history of every man and woman employed there was known back to the cradle. A broad highway encircled it outside the fence, patrolled night and day by twenty General Stuart cavalry-tanks. There were a thousand soldiers, and three hundred Atomic Power Authority police, and only God knew how many F.B.I, and Central Intelligence undercover agents. Every supervisor and inspector and salaried technician was an armed United States deputy marshal. And nobody, outside the Department of Defense, knew how much radar and counter-rocket and fighter protection the place had, but the air-defense zone extended from Boston to Philadelphia and as far inland as Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

The Long Island Nuclear Power Plant, Melroy thought, had all the invulnerability of Achilles—and no more.

The six new Doernberg-Giardano breeder-reactors clustered in a circle inside a windowless concrete building at the center of the plant. Beside their primary purpose of plutonium production, they furnished heat for the sea-water dis-

tillation and chemical extraction system, processing the water that was run through the steam boilers at the main power reactors, condensed, redistilled, and finally pumped, pure, into the water mains of New York. Safe outside the shielding, in a corner of a high-ceilinged room, was the plyboard-screened on-the-job office of the Melroy Engineering Corporation's timekeepers and foremen. Beyond, along the far wall, were the washroom and locker room and lunch room of the workmen.

Sixty or seventy men, mostly in white coveralls and all wearing identification badges and carrying dosimeters in their breast pockets and midget Geigers strapped to their wrists, were crowded about the bulletin-board in front of the makeshift office. There was a hum of voices—some perplexed or angry, but mostly good-humored and bantering. As Melroy and Doris Rives approached, the talking died out and the men turned. In the sudden silence, one voice, harshly strident, continued:

"... do they think this is, anyhow? We don't hafta take none of that."

Somebody must have nudged the speaker, trying without success to hush him. The bellicose voice continued, and Melroy spotted the speaker—short, thickset, his arms jutting out at an angle from his body, his heavy features soured with anger.

"Like we was a lotta halfwits, 'r nuts, 'r some'n! Well, we don't hafta stand for this. They ain't got no right—"

Doris Rives clung tighter to Melroy's arm as he pushed a way for himself and her through the crowd and into the temporary office. Inside, they were met by a young man with a deputy marshal's badge on his flannel shirt and a .38 revolver on his hip.

"Ben Puryear: Dr. Rives," Melroy introduced. "Who's the mouthy character outside?"

"One of the roustabouts; name's Burris," Puryear replied. "Wash-room lawyer."

Melroy nodded. "You always get one or two like that. How're the rest taking it?"

Puryear shrugged. "About how you'd expect. A lot of kidding about who's got any intelligence to test. Burris seems to be the only one who's trying to make an issue out of it."

"Well, what are they doing ganged up here?" Melroy wanted to know. "It's past oh-eight-hundred; why aren't they at work?"

"Reactor's still too hot. Temperature and radioactivity both too high; radioactivity's still up around eight hundred REM's."

"Well, then, we'll give them all the written portion of the test together, and start the personal interviews and oral tests as soon as they're through." He turned

to Doris Rives. "Can you give all of them the written test together?" he asked. "And can Ben help you—distributing forms, timing the test, seeing that there's no fudging, and collecting the forms when they're done?"

"Oh, yes; all they'll have to do is follow the printed instructions." She looked around. "I'll need a desk, and an extra chair for the interview subject."

"Right over here, doctor." Puryear said. "And here are the forms and cards, and the sound-recorder, and blank sound disks."

"Yes," Melroy added. "Be sure you get a recording of every interview and oral test; we may need them for evidence."

He broke off as a man in white coveralls came pushing into the office. He was a scrawny little fellow with a wide, loose-lipped mouth and a protuberant Adam's apple; beside his identity badge, he wore a two-inch celluloid button lettered: I.F.A.W. STEWARD.

"Wanta use the phone," he said. "Union business."

Melroy gestured toward a telephone on the desk beside him. The newcomer shook his head, twisting his mouth into a smirk.

"Not that one; the one with the whisper mouthpiece," he said. "This is private union business."

Melroy shrugged and indicated another phone. The man with the union steward's badge picked it up, dialed, and held a lengthy conversation into it, turning his head away in case Melroy might happen to be a lip reader. Finally he turned.

"Mr. Crandall wants to talk to you," he said, grinning triumphantly, the phone extended to Melroy.

The engineer picked up another phone, snapping a button on the base of it.

"Melroy here," he said.

Something on the line started going softly.

"Crandall, executive secretary, I.F.A.W.," the man on the other end of the line identified himself. "Is there a recorder going on this line?"

"Naturally," Melroy replied. "I record all business conversations; office routine."

"Mr. Melroy, I've been informed that you propose forcing our members in your employ to submit to some kind of a mental test. Is that correct?"

"Not exactly. I'm not able to force anybody to submit to anything against his will. If anybody objects to taking these tests, he can say so, and I'll have his time made out and pay him off."

"That's the same thing. A threat of dismissal is coercion, and if these men want to keep their jobs they'll have to take this test."

"Well, that's stated more or less correctly," Melroy conceded. "Let's just

put it that taking—and passing—this test is a condition of employment. My contract with your union recognizes my right to establish standards of intelligence; that's implied by my recognized right to dismiss any person of 'unsound mind, deficient mentality or emotional instability.' Psychological testing is the only means of determining whether or not a person is classifiable in those terms."

"Then, in case the test purports to show that one of these men is, let's say, mentally deficient, you intend dismissing him?"

"With the customary two weeks' severance-pay, yes."

"Well, if you do dismiss anybody on those grounds, the union will have to insist on reviewing the grounds for dismissal."

"My contract with your union says nothing whatever about any right of review being reserved by the union in such cases. Only in cases of disciplinary dismissal, which this is not. I take the position that certain minimum standards of intelligence and mental stability are essentials in this sort of work, just as, say, certain minimum standards of literacy are essential in clerical work."

"Then you're going to make these men take these tests, whatever they are?"

"If they want to work for me, yes. And anybody who fails to pass them will be dropped from my payroll."

"And who's going to decide whether or not these men have successfully passed these tests?" Crandall asked. "You?"

"Good Lord, no! I'm an electronics engineer, not a psychologist. The tests are being given, and will be evaluated, by a graduate psychologist, Dr. D. Warren Rives, who has a diploma from the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology and is a member of the American Psychological Association. Dr. Rives will be the final arbiter on who is or is not disqualified by these tests."

"Well, our man Koffler says you have some girl there to give the tests," Crandall accused.

"I suppose he means Dr. Rives," Melroy replied. "I can assure you, she is an extremely competent psychologist, however. She came to me most highly recommended by Dr. Karl von Heydenreich, who is not inclined to be careless with his recommendations."

"Well, Mr. Melroy, we don't want any more trouble with you than we have to have," Crandall told him, "but we will insist on reviewing any dismissals which occur as a result of these tests."

"You can do that. I'd advise, first, that you read over the contract you signed with me. Get a qualified lawyer to tell you what we've agreed to and what we haven't. Was there anything else you wanted to talk about?... No?... Then good morning, Mr. Crandall."

He hung up. "All right; let's get on with it," he said. "Ben, you get them into

the lunch room; there are enough tables and benches in there for everybody to take the written test in two relays."

"The union's gotta be represented while these tests is going on," the union steward announced. "Mr. Crandall says I'm to stay here an' watch what you do to these guys."

"This man working for us?" Melroy asked Puryear.

"Yes. Koffler, Julius. Electrical fitter; Joe Ricci's gang."

"All right. See to it that he gets placed in the first relay for the written test, and gets first turn for the orals. That way he can spend the rest of his time on duty here for the union, and will know in advance what the test is like." He turned to Koffler. "But understand this. You keep your mouth out of it. If you see anything that looks objectionable, make a note of it, but don't try to interfere."

The written tests, done on printed forms, required about twenty minutes. Melroy watched the process of oral testing and personal interviewing for a while, then picked up a big flashlight and dropped it into his overcoat pocket, preparatory to going out to inspect some equipment that had been assembled outside the reactor area and brought in. As he went out, Koffler was straddling a chair, glowering at Doris Rives and making occasional ostentatious notes on a pad.

For about an hour, he poked around the newly assembled apparatus, checking the wiring, and peering into it. When he returned to the temporary office, the oral testing was still going on; Koffler was still on duty as watcher for the union, but the sport had evidently palled on him, for he was now studying a comic book.

Melroy left the reactor area and returned to the office in the converted area. During the midafternoon, somebody named Leighton called him from the Atomic Power Authority executive office, wanting to know what was the trouble between him and the I.F.A.W. and saying that a protest against his alleged high-handed and arbitrary conduct had been received from the union.

Melroy explained, at length. He finished: "You people have twenty Stuart tanks, and a couple of thousand soldiers and cops and undercover-men, here, guarding against sabotage. Don't you realize that a workman who makes stupid or careless or impulsive mistakes is just as dangerous to the plant as any saboteur? If somebody shoots you through the head, it doesn't matter whether he planned to murder you for a year or just didn't know the gun was loaded; you're as dead one way as the other. I should think you'd thank me for trying to eliminate a serious source of danger."

"Now, don't misunderstand my position, Mr. Melroy," the other man hastened to say. "I sympathize with your attitude, entirely. But these people are going to make trouble."

"If they do, it'll be my trouble. I'm under contract to install this cybernetic system for you; you aren't responsible for my labor policy," Melroy replied. "Oh,

have you had much to do with this man Crandall, yourself?"

"Have I had—!" Leighton sputtered for a moment. "I'm in charge of personnel, here; that makes me his top-priority target, all the time."

"Well, what sort of a character is he, anyhow? When I contracted with the I.F.A.W., my lawyer and their lawyer handled everything; I never even met him."

"Well—He has his job to do, the same as I have," Leighton said. "He does it conscientiously. But it's like this—anything a workman tells him is the truth, and anything an employer tells him is a dirty lie. Until proven differently, of course, but that takes a lot of doing. And he goes off half-cocked a lot of times. He doesn't stop to analyze situations very closely."

"That's what I was afraid of. Well, you tell him you don't have any control over my labor relations. Tell him to bring his gripes to me."

At sixteen-thirty, Doris Rives came in, finding him still at his desk.

"I have the written tests all finished, and I have about twenty of the tests and interviews completed," she said. "I'll have to evaluate the results, though. I wonder if there's a vacant desk around here, anywhere, and a record player."

"Yes, sure. Ask Joan to fix you up; she'll find a place for you to work. And if you're going to be working late, I'll order some dinner for you from the cafeteria. I'm going to be here all evening, myself."

Sid Keating came in, a short while later, peeling out of his overcoat, jacket and shoulder holster.

"I don't think they got everything out of that reactor," he said. "Radioactivity's still almost active-normal—about eight hundred REM's—and the temperature's away up, too. That isn't lingering radiation; that's prompt radiation."

"Radioactivity hasn't dropped since morning; I'd think so, too," Melroy said. "What are they getting on the breakdown counter?"

"Mostly neutrons and alpha-particles. I talked to Fred Hausinger, the maintenance boss; he doesn't like it, either."

"Well, I'm no nuclear physicist," Melroy disclaimed, "but all that alpha stuff looks like a big chunk of Pu-239 left inside. What's Fred doing about it?"

"Oh, poking around inside the reactor with telemetered scanners and remote-control equipment. When I left, he had a gang pulling out graphite blocks with RC-tongs. We probably won't get a chance to work on it much before thirteen-hundred tomorrow." He unzipped a bulky brief case he had brought in under his arm and dumped papers onto his desk. "I still have this stuff to get straightened out, too."

"Had anything to eat? Then call the cafeteria and have them send up three dinners. Dr. Rives is eating here, too. Find out what she wants; I want pork chops."

"Uh-huh; Li'l Abner Melroy; po'k chops unless otherwise specified." Keating

got up and went out into the middle office. As he opened the door. Melroy could hear a recording of somebody being given a word-association test.

Half an hour later, when the food arrived, they spread their table on a relatively clear desk in the middle office. Doris Rives had finished evaluating the completed tests; after dinner, she intended going over the written portions of the uncompleted tests.

"How'd the finished tests come out?" Melroy asked her.

"Better than I'd expected. Only two washouts," she replied. "Harvey Burris and Julius Koffler."

"Oh, !" Keating wailed. "The I.F.A.W. steward, and the loudest-mouthed I-know-my-rights boy on the job!"

"Well, wasn't that to be expected?" Melroy asked. "If you'd seen the act those two put on—"

"They're both inherently stupid, infantile, and deficient in reasoning ability and judgment," Doris said. "Koffler is a typical adolescent problem-child show-off type, and Burris is an almost perfect twelve-year-old schoolyard bully. They both have inferiority complexes long enough to step on. If the purpose of this test is what I'm led to believe it is, I can't, in professional good conscience, recommend anything but that you get rid of both of them."

"What Bob's getting at is that they're the very ones who can claim, with the best show of plausibility, that the test is just a pretext to fire them for union activities," Melroy explained. "And the worst of it is, they're the only ones."

"Maybe we can scrub out a couple more on the written tests alone. Then they'll have company," Keating suggested.

"No, I can't do that." Doris was firm on the point. "The written part of the test was solely for ability to reason logically. Just among the three of us, I know some university professors who'd flunk on that. But if the rest of the tests show stability, sense of responsibility, good judgment, and a tendency to think before acting, the subject can be classified as a safe and reliable workman."

"Well, then, let's don't say anything till we have the tests all finished," Keating proposed.

"No!" Melroy cried. "Every minute those two are on the job, there's a chance they may do something disastrous. I'll fire them at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow."

"All right," Keating shook his head. "I only work here. But don't say I didn't warn you."

By 0930 the next morning, Keating's forebodings began to be realized. The first intimation came with a phone call to Melroy from Crandall, who accused him of having used the psychological tests as a fraudulent pretext for discharging Koffler and Burris for union activities. When Melroy rejected his demand that the

two men be reinstated, Crandall demanded to see the records of the tests.

"They're here at my office," Melroy told him. "You're welcome to look at them, and hear recordings of the oral portions of the tests. But I'd advise you to bring a professional psychologist along, because unless you're a trained psychologist yourself, they're not likely to mean much to you."

"Oh, sure!" Crandall retorted. "They'd have to be unintelligible to ordinary people, or you couldn't get away with this frame-up! Well, don't worry, I'll be along to see them."

Within ten minutes, the phone rang again. This time it was Leighton, the Atomic Power Authority man.

"We're much disturbed about this dispute between your company and the I.F.A.W.," he began.

"Well, frankly, so am I," Melroy admitted. "I'm here to do a job, not play Hatfields and McCoys with this union. I've had union trouble before, and it isn't fun. You're the gentleman who called me last evening, aren't you? Then you understand my position in the matter."

"Certainly, Mr. Melroy. I was talking to Colonel Bradshaw, the security officer, last evening. He agrees that a stupid or careless workman is, under some circumstances, a more serious threat to security than any saboteur. And we realize fully how dangerous those Doernberg-Giardanos are, and how much more dangerous they'd be if these cybernetic controls were improperly assembled. But this man Crandall is talking about calling a strike."

"Well, let him. In the first place, it'd be against me, not against the Atomic Power Authority. And, in the second place, if he does and it goes to Federal mediation, his demand for the reinstatement of those men will be thrown out, and his own organization will have to disavow his action, because he'll be calling the strike against his own contract."

"Well, I hope so." Leighton's tone indicated that the hope was rather dim. "I wish you luck; you're going to need it."

Within the hour, Crandall arrived at Melroy's office. He was a young man; he gave Melroy the impression of having recently seen military service; probably in the Indonesian campaign of '62 and '63; he also seemed a little cocky and over-sure of himself.

"Mr. Melroy, we're not going to stand for this," he began, as soon as he came into the room. "You're using these so-called tests as a pretext for getting rid of Mr. Koffler and Mr. Burris because of their legitimate union activities."

"Who gave you that idea?" Melroy wanted to know. "Koffler and Burris?"

"That's the complaint they made to me, and it's borne out by the facts," Crandall replied. "We have on record at least half a dozen complaints that Mr.

Koffler has made to us about different unfair work-assignments, improper working conditions, inequities in allotting overtime work, and other infractions of union-shop conditions, on behalf of Mr. Burris. So you decided to get rid of both of them, and you think you can use this clause in our contract with your company about persons of deficient intelligence. The fact is, you're known to have threatened on several occasions to get rid of both of them."

"I am?" Melroy looked at Crandall curiously, wondering if the latter were serious, and deciding that he was. "You must believe those people tell you. Well, they lied to you if they told you that."

"Naturally that's what you'd say," Crandall replied. "But how do you account for the fact that those two men, and only those two men, were dismissed for alleged deficient intelligence?"

"The tests aren't all made," Melroy replied. "Until they are, you can't say that they are the only ones disqualified. And if you look over the records of the tests, you'll see where Koffler and Burris failed and the others passed. Here." He laid the pile of written-test forms and the summary and evaluation sheets on the desk. "Here's Koffler's, and here's Burris'; these are the ones of the men who passed the test. Look them over if you want to."

Crandall examined the forms and summaries for the two men who had been discharged, and compared them with several random samples from the satisfactory pile.

"Why, this stuff's a lot of gibberish!" he exclaimed indignantly. "This thing, here: ... five Limerick oysters, six pairs of Don Alfonso tweezers, seven hundred Macedonian warriors in full battle array, eight golden crowns from the ancient, secret crypts of Egypt, nine lymphatic, sympathetic, peripatetic old men on crutches, and ten revolving heliotropes from the Ipsy-Wipsy Institute!' Great Lord, do you actually mean that you're using this stuff as an excuse for depriving men of their jobs?"

"I warned you that you should have brought a professional psychologist along," Melroy reminded him. "And maybe you ought to get Koffler and Burris to repeat their complaints on a lie-detector, while you're at it. They took the same tests, in the same manner, as any of the others. They just didn't have the mental equipment to cope with them and the others did. And for that reason, I won't run the risk of having them working on this job."

"That's just your word against theirs," Crandall insisted obstinately. "Their complaint is that you framed this whole thing up to get rid of them."

"Why, I didn't even know who either of them were, until yesterday morning."

"That's not the way they tell it," Crandall retorted. "They say you and Keating have been out to get them ever since they were hired. You and your supervisors

have been persecuting both of those men systematically. The fact that Burris has had grounds for all these previous complaints proves that."

"It proves that Burris has a persecution complex, and that Koffler's credulous enough to believe him," Melroy replied. "And that tends to confirm the results of the tests they failed to pass."

"Oh, so that's the line you're taking. You persecute a man, and then say he has a persecution complex if he recognizes the fact. Well, you're not going to get away with it, that's all I have to say to you." Crandall flung the test-sheet he had been holding on to the desk. "That stuff's not worth the paper it's scribbled on!" He turned on his heel in an automatically correct about-face and strode out of the office.

Melroy straightened out the papers and put them away, then sat down at his desk, filling and lighting his pipe. He was still working at 1215 when Ben Puryear called him.

"They walked out on us," he reported. "Harry Crandall was out here talking to them, and at noon the whole gang handed in their wrist-Geigers and dosimeters and cleared out their lockers. They say they aren't coming back till Burris and Koffler come back to work with them."

"Then they aren't coming back, period," Melroy replied. "Crandall was to see me, a couple of hours ago. He tells me that Burris and Koffler told him that we've been persecuting Burris; discriminating against him. You know of anything that really happened that might make them think anything like that?"

"No. Burris is always yelling about not getting enough overtime work, but you know how it is: he's just a roustabout, a common laborer. Any overtime work that has to be done is usually skilled labor on this job. We generally have a few roustabouts to help out, but he's been allowed to make overtime as much as any of the others."

"Will the time-records show that?"

"They ought to. I don't know what he and Koffler told Crandall, but whatever it was, I'll bet they were lying."

"That's all right, then. How's the reactor, now?"

"Hausinger says the count's down to safe limits, and the temperature's down to inactive normal. He and his gang found a big chunk of plutonium, about one-quarter CM, inside. He got it out."

"All right. Tell Dr. Rives to gather up all her completed or partially completed test records and come out to the office. You and the others stay on the job; we may have some men for you by this afternoon; tomorrow morning certainly."

He hung up, then picked up the communicator phone and called his secretary.

"Joan, is Sid Keating out there? Send him in, will you?"

Keating, when he entered, was wearing the lugubriously gratified expression appropriate to the successful prophet of disaster.

"All right, Cassandra," Melroy greeted him. "I'm not going to say you didn't warn me. Look. This strike is illegal. It's a violation of the Federal Labor Act of 1958, being called without due notice of intention, without preliminary negotiation, and without two weeks' time-allowance."

"They're going to claim that it isn't a strike. They're going to call it a 'spontaneous work-stoppage.'"

"Aah! I hope I can get Crandall on record to that effect; I'll fire every one of those men for leaving their work without permission and absence from duty without leave. How many of our own men, from Pittsburgh, do we have working in these machine shops and in the assembly shop here? About sixty?"

"Sixty-three. Why? You're not going to use them to work on the reactor, are you?"

"I just am. They're all qualified cybernetics technicians; they can do this work better than this gang we've had to hire here. Just to be on the safe side, I'm promoting all of them, as of oh-eight-hundred this morning, to assistant gang-foremen, on salaries. That'll take them outside union jurisdiction."

"But how about our contract with the I.F.A.W.?"

"That's been voided, by Crandall's own act, in interfering with the execution of our contract with the Atomic Power Authority. You know what I think? I think the I.F.A.W. front office is going to have to disavow this. It'll hurt them to do it, but they'll have to. Crandall's put them in the middle on this."

"How about security clearance for our own men?"

"Nothing to that," Melroy said. "Most of them are security-cleared, already, from the work we did installing that counter-rocket control system on the U.S.S. , and the work we did on that symbolic-logic computer for the Philadelphia Project. It may take all day to get the red tape unwound, but I think we can be ready to start by oh-eight-hundred tomorrow."

By the time Keating had rounded up all the regular Melroy Engineering Corporation employees and Melroy had talked to Colonel Bradshaw about security-clearance, it was 1430. A little later, he was called on the phone by Leighton, the Atomic Power Authority man.

"Melroy, what are you trying to do?" the Power Authority man demanded. "Get this whole plant struck shut? The I.F.A.W.'s madder than a shot-stung bobcat. They claim you're going to bring in strike-breakers; they're talking about picketing the whole reactor area."

"News gets around fast, here, doesn't it?" Melroy commented. He told

Leighton what he had in mind. The Power Authority man was considerably shaken before he had finished.

"But they'll call a strike on the whole plant! Have you any idea what that would mean?"

"Certainly I have. They'll either call it in legal form, in which case the whole thing will go to mediation and get aired, which is what I want, or they'll pull a Pearl Harbor on you, the way they did on me. And in that case, the President will have to intervene, and they'll fly in technicians from some of the Armed Forces plants to keep this place running. And in that case, things'll get settled that much quicker. This Crandall thinks these men I fired are martyrs, and he's preaching a crusade. He ought to carry an on his payroll, to scrutinize the qualifications of his martyrs, before he starts canonizing them."

A little later, Doris Rives came into the office, her hands full of papers and cards.

"I have twelve more tests completed," she reported. "Only one washout."

Melroy laughed. "Doctor, they're all washed out," he told her. "It seems there was an additional test, and they all flunked it. Evinced willingness to follow unwise leadership and allow themselves to be talked into improper courses of action. You go on in to New York, and take all the test-material, including sound records, with you. Stay at the hotel—your pay will go on—till I need you. There'll be a Federal Mediation hearing in a day or so."

He had two more telephone calls. The first, at 1530, was from Leighton. Melroy suspected that the latter had been medicating his morale with a couple of stiff drinks: his voice was almost jaunty.

"Well, the war's on," he announced. "The I.F.A.W.'s walking out on the whole plant, at oh-eight-hundred tomorrow."

"In violation of the Federal Labor Act, Section Eight, paragraphs four and five," Melroy supplemented. "Crandall really has stuck his neck in the guillotine. What's Washington doing?"

"President Hartley is ordering Navy personnel flown in from Kennebunkport Reaction Lab; they will be here by about oh-three-hundred tomorrow. And a couple of Federal mediators are coming in to La Guardia at seventeen hundred; they're going to hold preliminary hearings at the new Federal Building on Washington Square beginning twenty hundred. A couple of I.F.A.W. negotiators are coming in from the national union headquarters at Oak Ridge: they should be getting in about the same time. You'd better be on hand, and have Dr. Rives there with you. There's a good chance this thing may get cleared up in a day or so."

"I will undoubtedly be there, complete with Dr. Rives," Melroy replied. "It will be a pleasure!"

An hour later, Ben Puryear called from the reactor area, his voice strained

with anger.

"Scott, do you know what those—" He gargled obscenities for a moment. "You know what they've done? They've re-packed the Number One Doernberg-Giardano; got a chain-reaction started again."

"Who?"

"Fred Hausinger's gang. Apparently at Harry Crandall's orders. The excuse was that it would be unsafe to leave the reactor in its dismantled condition during a prolonged shutdown—they were assuming, I suppose, that the strike would be allowed to proceed unopposed—but of course the real reason was that they wanted to get a chain-reaction started to keep our people from working on the reactor."

"Well, didn't Hausinger try to stop them?"

"Not very hard. I asked him what he had that deputy marshal's badge on his shirt and that Luger on his hip for, but he said he had orders not to use force, for fear of prejudicing the mediators."

Melroy swore disgustedly. "All right. Gather up all our private papers, and get Steve and Joe, and come on out. We only work here—when we're able."

Doris Rives was waiting on the street level when Melroy reached the new Federal Building, in what had formerly been the Greenwich Village district of Manhattan, that evening. She had a heavy brief case with her, which he took.

"I was afraid I'd keep you waiting," she said. "I came down from the hotel by cab, and there was a frightful jam at Fortieth Street, and another one just below Madison Square."

"Yes, it gets worse every year. Pardon my obsession, but nine times out of ten—ninety-nine out of a hundred—it's the fault of some fool doing something stupid. Speaking about doing stupid things, though—I did one. Forgot to take that gun out of my overcoat pocket, and didn't notice that I had it till I was on the subway, coming in. Have a big flashlight in the other pocket, but that doesn't matter. What I'm worried about is that somebody'll find out I have a gun and raise a howl about my coming armed to a mediation hearing."

The hearing was to be held in one of the big conference rooms on the forty-second floor. Melroy was careful to remove his overcoat and lay it on a table in the corner, and then help Doris off with hers and lay it on top of his own. There were three men in the room when they arrived: Kenneth Leighton, the Atomic Power Authority man, fiftyish, acquiring a waistline bulge and losing his hair: a Mr. Lyons, tall and slender, with white hair; and a Mr. Quillen, considerably younger, with plastic-rimmed glasses. The latter two were the Federal mediators. All three had been lounging in arm-chairs, talking about the new plays on Broadway. They all rose when Melroy and Doris Rives came over to join them.

"We mustn't discuss business until the others get here," Leighton warned.

"It's bad enough that all three of us got here ahead of them; they'll be sure to think we're trying to take an unfair advantage of them. I suppose neither of you have had time to see any of the new plays."

Fortunately, Doris and Melroy had gone to the theater after dinner, the evening-before-last; they were able to join the conversation. Young Mr. Quillen wanted Doris Rives' opinion, as a psychologist, of the mental processes of the heroine of the play they had seen; as nearly as she could determine, Doris replied, the heroine in question had exhibited nothing even loosely describable as mental processes of any sort. They were still on the subject when the two labor negotiators, Mr. Cronnin and Mr. Fields, arrived. Cronnin was in his sixties, with the nearsighted squint and compressed look of concentration of an old-time precision machinist; Fields was much younger, and sported a Phi Beta Kappa key.

Lyons, who seemed to be the senior mediator, thereupon called the meeting to order and they took their places at the table.

"Now, gentlemen—and Dr. Rives—this will be simply an informal discussion, so that everybody can see what everybody else's position in the matter is. We won't bother to make a sound recording. Then, if we have managed to reach some common understanding of the question this evening, we can start the regular hearing say at thirteen hundred tomorrow. Is that agreeable?"

It was. The younger mediator, Quillen, cleared his throat.

"It seems, from our information, that this entire dispute arises from the discharge, by Mr. Melroy, of two of his employees, named Koffler and Burris. Is that correct?"

"Well, there's also the question of the Melroy Engineering Corporation's attempting to use strike-breakers, and the Long Island Atomic Power Authority's having condoned this unfair employment practice," Cronnin said, acidly.

"And there's also the question of the I.F.A.W.'s calling a Pearl Harbor strike on my company," Melroy added.

"We resent that characterization!" Cronnin retorted.

"It's a term in common usage; it denotes a strike called without warning or declaration of intention, which this was," Melroy told him.

"And there's also the question of the I.F.A.W. calling a general strike, in illegal manner, at the Long Island Reaction Plant," Leighton spoke up. "On sixteen hours' notice."

"Well, that wasn't the fault of the I.F.A.W. as an organization," Fields argued. "Mr. Cronnin and I are agreed that the walk-out date should be postponed for two weeks, in accordance with the provisions of the Federal Labor Act."

"Well, how about my company?" Melroy wanted to know. "Your I.F.A.W. members walked out on me, without any notice whatever, at twelve hundred to-

day. Am I to consider that an act of your union, or will you disavow it so that I can fire all of them for quitting without permission?"

"And how about the action of members of your union, acting on instructions from Harry Crandall, in re-packing the Number One Doernberg-Giardano breeder-reactor at our plant, after the plutonium and the U-238 and the neutron-source containers had been removed, in order to re-initiate a chain reaction to prevent Mr. Melroy's employees from working on the reactor?" Leighton demanded. "Am I to understand that the union sustains that action, too?"

"I hadn't known about that," Fields said, somewhat startled.

"Neither had I," Cronnin added. "When did it happen?"

"About sixteen hundred today," Melroy told him.

"We were on the plane from Oak Ridge, then," Fields declared. "We know nothing about that."

"Well, are you going to take the responsibility for it, or aren't you?" Leighton insisted.

Lyons, who had been toying with a small metal paperweight, rapped on the table with it.

"Gentlemen," he interrupted. "We're trying to cover too many subjects at once. I suggest that we confine ourselves, at the beginning, to the question of the dismissal of these men, Burris and Koffler. If we find that the I.F.A.W. has a legitimate grievance in what we may call the Burris-Koffler question, we can settle that and then go on to these other questions."

"I'm agreeable to that," Melroy said.

"So are we," Cronnin nodded.

"All right, then. Since the I.F.A.W. is the complaining party in this question, perhaps you gentlemen should state the grounds for your complaints."

Fields and Cronnin exchanged glances: Cronnin nodded to Fields and the latter rose. The two employees in question, he stated, had been the victims of discrimination and persecution because of union activities. Koffler was the union shop-steward for the men employed by the Melroy Engineering Corporation, and Burris had been active in bringing complaints about unfair employment practices. Furthermore, it was the opinion of the I.F.A.W. that the psychological tests imposed on their members had been a fraudulent pretext for dismissing these two men, and, in any case, the practice of compelling workers to submit to such tests was insulting, degrading, and not a customary condition of employment.

With that, he sat down. Melroy was on his feet at once.

"I'll deny those statements, categorically and seriatim," he replied. "They are based entirely upon misrepresentations made by the two men who were disqualified by the tests and dropped from my payroll because of being, in the words

of my contract with your union, 'persons of unsound mind, deficient intelligence and/or emotional instability.' What happened is that your local official, Crandall, accepted everything they told him uncritically, and you accepted everything Crandall told you, in the same spirit.

"Before I go on," Melroy continued, turning to Lyons, "have I your permission to let Dr. Rives explain about these tests, herself, and tell how they were given and evaluated?"

Permission granted by Lyons, Doris Rives rose. At some length, she explained the nature and purpose of the tests, and her method of scoring and correlating them.

"Well, did Mr. Melroy suggest to you that any specific employee or employees of his were undesirable and ought to be eliminated?" Fields asked.

"Certainly not!" Doris Rives became angry. "And if he had, I'd have taken the first plane out of here. That suggestion is insulting! And for your information, I never met Mr. Melroy before day-before-yesterday afternoon; I am not dependent upon him for anything; I took this job as an accommodation to Dr. Karl von Heydenreich, who ordinarily does such work for the Melroy company, and I'm losing money by remaining here. Does that satisfy you?"

"Yes, it does," Fields admitted. He was obviously impressed by mention of the distinguished Austrian psychologist's name. "If I may ask Mr. Melroy a question: I gather that these tests are given to all your employees. Why do you demand such an extraordinary level of intelligence from your employees, even common laborers?"

"Extraordinary?" Melroy echoed. "If the standards established by those tests are extraordinary, then God help this country; we are becoming a race of morons! I'll leave that statement to Dr. Rives for confirmation; she's already pointed out that all that is required to pass those tests is ordinary adult mental capacity.

"My company specializes in cybernetic-control systems," he continued. "In spite of a lot of misleading colloquial jargon about 'thinking machines' and 'giant brains', a cybernetic system doesn't really think. It only does what it's been designed to do, and if somebody builds a mistake into it, it will automatically and infallibly repeat that mistake in practice."

"He's right," Cronnin said. "The men that build a machine like that have got to be as smart as the machine's supposed to be, or the machine'll be as dumb as they are."

Fields turned on him angrily. "Which side are you supposed to be on, anyhow?" he demanded.

"You're probably a lawyer," Melroy said. "But I'll bet Mr. Cronnin's an old reaction-plant man." Cronnin nodded unthinkingly in confirmation. "All right, then. Ask him what those Doernberg-Giardanos are like. And then let me ask you: Sup-

pose some moron fixed up something that would go wrong, or made the wrong kind of a mistake himself, around one of those reactors?"

It was purely a rhetorical question, but, much later, when he would have time to think about it, Scott Melroy was to wonder if ever in history such a question had been answered so promptly and with such dramatic calamitousness.

Three seconds after he stopped speaking, the lights went out.

For a moment, they were silent and motionless. Then somebody across the table from Melroy began to say, "What the devil—?" Doris Rives, beside him, clutched his arm. At the head of the table, Lyons was fuming impatiently, and Kenneth Leighton snapped a pocket-lighter and held it up.

The Venetian-screened windows across the room faced east. In the flicker of the lighter, Melroy made his way around to them and drew open the slats of one, looking out. Except for the headlights of cars, far down in the street, and the lights of ships in the harbor, the city was completely blacked out. But there was one other, horrible, light far away at the distant tip of Long Island—a huge ball of flame, floating upward at the tip of a column of fiery gas. As he watched, there were twinkles of unbearable brightness at the base of the pillar of fire, spreading into awesome sheet-flashes, and other fireballs soared up. Then the sound and the shock-wave of the first blast reached them.

"The main power-reactors, too," Melroy said to himself, not realizing that he spoke audibly. "Too well shielded for the blast to get them, but the heat melted the fissionables down to critical mass."

Leighton, the lighter still burning, was beside him, now.

"That's not—God, it can't be anything else! Why, the whole plant's gone! There aren't enough other generators in this area to handle a hundredth of the demand."

"And don't blame that on my alleged strike-breakers," Melroy warned. "They hadn't got security-cleared to enter the reactor area when this happened."

"What do you think happened?" Cronnin asked. "One of the Doernberg-Giardanos let go?"

"Yes. Your man Crandall. If he survived that, it's his bad luck," Melroy said grimly. "Last night, while Fred Hausinger was pulling the fissionables and radioactives out of the Number One breeder, he found a big nugget of Pu-239, about one-quarter CM. I don't know what was done with it, but I do know that Crandall had the maintenance gang repack that reactor, to keep my people from working on it. Nobody'll ever find out just what happened, but they were in a hurry; they probably shoved things in any old way. Somehow, that big subcritical nugget must have got back in, and the breeding-cans, which were pretty ripe by that time, must have been shoved in too close to it and to one another. You know how fast those D-G's work. It just took this long to build up CM for a bomb-type

reaction. You remember what I was saying before the lights went out? Well, it happened. Some moron—some untested and undetected moron—made the wrong kind of a mistake."

"Too bad about Crandall. He was a good kid, only he didn't stop to think often enough," Cronnin said. "Well, I guess the strike's off, now; that's one thing."

"But all those people, out there!" Womanlike, Doris Rives was thinking particularly rather than generally and of humans rather than abstractions. "It must have killed everybody for miles around."

Sid Keating, Melroy thought. And Joe Ricci, and Ben Puryear, and Steve Chalmers, and all the workmen whom he had brought here from Pittsburgh, to their death. Then he stopped thinking about them. It didn't do any good to think of men who'd been killed; he'd learned that years ago, as a kid second lieutenant in Korea. The people to think about were the millions in Greater New York, and up the Hudson Valley to Albany, and as far south as Trenton, caught without light in the darkness, without heat in the dead of winter, without power in subways and skyscrapers and on railroads and interurban lines.

He turned to the woman beside him.

"Doris, before you could get your Board of Psychiatry and Neurology diploma, you had to qualify as a regular M.D., didn't you?" he asked.

"Why, yes—"

"Then you'd better report to the nearest hospital. Any doctor at all is going to be desperately needed, for the next day or so. Me, I still have a reserve major's commission in the Army Corps of Engineers. They're probably calling up reserve officers, with any radios that are still working. Until I hear differently, I'm ordering myself on active duty as of now." He looked around. "Anybody know where the nearest Army headquarters is?"

"There's a recruiting station down on the thirty-something floor," Quillen said. "It's probably closed, now, though."

"Ground Defense Command; Midtown City," Leighton said. "They have a medical section of their own; they'll be glad to get Dr. Rives, too."

Melroy helped her on with her coat and handed her her handbag, then shrugged into his own overcoat and belted it about him, the weight of the flashlight and the automatic sagging the pockets. He'd need both, the gun as much as the light—New York had more than its share of vicious criminals, to whom this power-failure would be a perfect devilsend. Handing Doris the light, he let her take his left arm. Together, they left the room and went down the hallway to the stairs and the long walk to the darkened street below, into a city that had suddenly been cut off from its very life-energy. A city that had put all its eggs in one basket, and left the basket in the path of any blundering foot.

DEAREST

Colonel Ashley Hampton chewed his cigar and forced himself to relax, his glance slowly traversing the room, lingering on the mosaic of book-spines in the tall cases, the sunlight splashed on the faded pastel colors of the carpet, the soft-tinted autumn landscape outside the French windows, the trophies of Indian and Filipino and German weapons on the walls. He could easily feign relaxation here in the library of "Greyrock," as long as he looked only at these familiar inanimate things and avoided the five people gathered in the room with him, for all of them were enemies.

There was his nephew, Stephen Hampton, greying at the temples but youthfully dressed in sports-clothes, leaning with obvious if slightly premature proprietorship against the fireplace, a whiskey-and-soda in his hand. There was Myra, Stephen's smart, sophisticated-looking blonde wife, reclining in a chair beside the desk. For these two, he felt an implacable hatred. The others were no less enemies, perhaps more dangerous enemies, but they were only the tools of Stephen and Myra. For instance, T. Barnwell Powell, prim and self-satisfied, sitting on the edge of his chair and clutching the briefcase on his lap as though it were a restless pet which might attempt to escape. He was an honest man, as lawyers went; painfully ethical. No doubt he had convinced himself that his clients were acting from the noblest and most disinterested motives. And Doctor Alexis Vehrner, with his Vandyke beard and his Viennese accent as phony as a Soviet-controlled election, who had preempted the chair at Colonel Hampton's desk. That rankled the old soldier, but Doctor Vehrner would want to assume the position which would give him appearance of commanding the situation, and he probably felt that Colonel Hampton was no longer the master of "Greyrock." The fifth, a Neanderthal type in a white jacket, was Doctor Vehrner's attendant and bodyguard; he could be ignored, like an enlisted man unthinkingly obeying the orders of a superior.

"But you are not cooperating, Colonel Hampton," the psychiatrist complained. "How can I help you if you do not cooperate?"

Colonel Hampton took the cigar from his mouth. His white mustache, tinged

a faint yellow by habitual smoking, twitched angrily.

"Oh; you call it helping me, do you?" he asked acidly.

"But why else am I here?" the doctor parried.

"You're here because my loving nephew and his charming wife can't wait to see me buried in the family cemetery; they want to bury me alive in that private Bedlam of yours," Colonel Hampton replied.

"See!" Myra Hampton turned to the psychiatrist. "We are him! We are all of him! We are him!"

"Of course; this sullen and suspicious silence is a common paranoid symptom; one often finds such symptoms in cases of senile dementia," Doctor Vehrner agreed.

Colonel Hampton snorted contemptuously. Senile dementia! Well, he must have been senile and demented, to bring this pair of snakes into his home, because he felt an obligation to his dead brother's memory. And he'd willed "Greyrock," and his money, and everything, to Stephen. Only Myra couldn't wait till he died; she'd Lady-Macbethed her husband into this insanity accusation.

"... however, I must fully satisfy myself, before I can sign the commitment," the psychiatrist was saying. "After all, the patient is a man of advanced age. Seventy-eight, to be exact."

Seventy-eight; almost eighty. Colonel Hampton could hardly realize that he had been around so long. He had been a little boy, playing soldiers. He had been a young man, breaking the family tradition of Harvard and wangling an appointment to West Point. He had been a new second lieutenant at a little post in Wyoming, in the last dying flicker of the Indian Wars. He had been a first lieutenant, trying to make soldiers of militiamen and hoping for orders to Cuba before the Spaniards gave up. He had been the hard-bitten captain of a hard-bitten company, fighting Moros in the jungles of Mindanao. Then, through the early years of the Twentieth Century, after his father's death, he had been that in the American service, a really wealthy professional officer. He had played polo, and served a turn as military attache at the Paris embassy. He had commanded a regiment in France in 1918, and in the post-war years, had rounded out his service in command of a regiment of Negro cavalry, before retiring to "Greyrock." Too old for active service, or even a desk at the Pentagon, he had drilled a Home Guard company of 4-Fs and boys and paunchy middle-agers through the Second World War. Then he had been an old man, sitting alone in the sunlight ... until a wonderful thing had happened.

"Get him to tell you about this invisible playmate of his," Stephen suggested. "If that won't satisfy you, I don't know what will."

It had begun a year ago last June. He had been sitting on a bench on the east lawn, watching a kitten playing with a crumpled bit of paper on the walk, circling

warily around it as though it were some living prey, stalking cautiously, pouncing and striking the paper ball with a paw and then pursuing it madly. The kitten, whose name was Smokeball, was a friend of his; soon she would tire of her game and jump up beside him to be petted.

Then suddenly, he seemed to hear a girl's voice beside him:

"Oh, what a darling little cat! What's its name?"

"Smokeball," he said, without thinking. "She's about the color of a shrapnel-burst...." Then he stopped short, looking about. There was nobody in sight, and he realized that the voice had been inside his head rather than in his ear.

"What the devil?" he asked himself. "Am I going nuts?"

There was a happy little laugh inside of him, like bubbles rising in a glass of champagne.

"Oh, no; I'm really here," the voice, inaudible but mentally present, assured him. "You can't see me, or touch me, or even really hear me, but I'm not something you just imagined. I'm just as real as ... as Smokeball, there. Only I'm a different kind of reality. Watch."

The voice stopped, and something that had seemed to be close to him left him. Immediately, the kitten stopped playing with the crumpled paper and cocked her head to one side, staring fixedly as at something above her. He'd seen cats do that before—stare wide-eyed and entranced, as though at something wonderful which was hidden from human eyes. Then, still looking up and to the side, Smokeball trotted over and jumped onto his lap, but even as he stroked her, she was looking at an invisible something beside him. At the same time, he had a warm and pleasant feeling, as of a happy and affectionate presence near him.

"No," he said, slowly and judicially. "That's not just my imagination. But who—or what—are you?"

"I'm.... Oh, I don't know how to think it so that you'll understand." The voice inside his head seemed baffled, like a physicist trying to explain atomic energy to a Hottentot. "I'm not material. If you can imagine a mind that doesn't need a brain to think with.... Oh, I can't explain it now! But when I'm talking to you, like this, I'm really thinking inside your brain, along with your own mind, and you hear the words without there being any sound. And you just don't know any words that would express it."

He had never thought much, one way or another, about spiritualism. There had been old people, when he had been a boy, who had told stories of ghosts and apparitions, with the firmest conviction that they were true. And there had been an Irishman, in his old company in the Philippines, who swore that the ghost of a dead comrade walked post with him when he was on guard.

"Are you a spirit?" he asked. "I mean, somebody who once lived in a body, like me?"

"N-no." The voice inside him seemed doubtful. "That is, I don't think so. I know about spirits; they're all around, everywhere. But I don't think I'm one. At least, I've always been like I am now, as long as I can remember. Most spirits don't seem to sense me. I can't reach most living people, either; their minds are closed to me, or they have such disgusting minds I can't bear to touch them. Children are open to me, but when they tell their parents about me, they are laughed at, or punished for lying, and then they close up against me. You're the first grown-up person I've been able to reach for a long time."

"Probably getting into my second childhood," Colonel Hampton grunted.

"Oh, but you mustn't be ashamed of that!" the invisible entity told him. "That's the beginning of real wisdom—becoming childlike again. One of your religious teachers said something like that, long ago, and a long time before that, there was a Chinaman whom people called Venerable Child, because his wisdom had turned back again to a child's simplicity."

"That was Lao Tze," Colonel Hampton said, a little surprised. "Don't tell me you've been around that long."

"Oh, but I have! Longer than that; oh, for very long." And yet the voice he seemed to be hearing was the voice of a young girl. "You don't mind my coming to talk to you?" it continued. "I get so lonely, so dreadfully lonely, you see."

"Urmh! So do I," Colonel Hampton admitted. "I'm probably going bats, but what the hell? It's a nice way to go bats, I'll say that.... Stick around; whoever you are, and let's get acquainted. I sort of like you."

A feeling of warmth suffused him, as though he had been hugged by someone young and happy and loving.

"Oh, I'm glad. I like you, too; you're nice!"

"Yes, of course." Doctor Vehrner nodded sagely. "That is a schizoid tendency; the flight from reality into a dream-world peopled by creatures of the imagination. You understand, there is usually a mixture of psychotic conditions, in cases like this. We will say that this case begins with simple senile dementia—physical brain degeneration, a result of advanced age. Then the paranoid symptoms appear; he imagines himself surrounded by envious enemies, who are conspiring against him. The patient then withdraws into himself, and in his self-imposed isolation, he conjures up imaginary companionship. I have no doubt...."

In the beginning, he had suspected that this unseen visitor was no more than a figment of his own lonely imagination, but as the days passed, this suspicion vanished. Whatever this entity might be, an entity it was, entirely distinct from his own conscious or subconscious mind.

At first she—he had early come to think of the being as feminine—had seemed timid, fearful lest her intrusions into his mind prove a nuisance. It took some time for him to assure her that she was always welcome. With time, too, his

impression of her grew stronger and more concrete. He found that he was able to visualize her, as he might visualize something remembered, or conceived of in imagination—a lovely young girl, slender and clothed in something loose and filmy, with flowers in her honey-colored hair, and clear blue eyes, a pert, cheerful face, a wide, smiling mouth and an impudently up-tilted nose. He realized that this image was merely a sort of allegorical representation, his own private object-abstraction from a reality which his senses could never picture as it existed.

It was about this time that he had begun to call her Dearest. She had given him no name, and seemed quite satisfied with that one.

"I've been thinking," she said, "I ought to have a name for you, too. Do you mind if I call you Popsy?"

"Huh?" He had been really startled at that. If he needed any further proof of Dearest's independent existence, that was it. Never, in the uttermost depths of his subconscious, would he have been likely to label himself Popsy. "Know what they used to call me in the Army?" he asked. "Slaughterhouse Hampton. They claimed I needed a truckload of sawdust to follow me around and cover up the blood." He chuckled. "Nobody but you would think of calling me Popsy."

There was a price, he found, that he must pay for Dearest's companionship—the price of eternal vigilance. He found that he was acquiring the habit of opening doors and then needlessly standing aside to allow her to precede him. And, although she insisted that he need not speak aloud to her, that she could understand any thought which he directed to her, he could not help actually pronouncing the words, if only in a faint whisper. He was glad that he had learned, before the end of his plebe year at West Point, to speak without moving his lips.

Besides himself and the kitten, Smokeball, there was one other at "Greyrock" who was aware, if only faintly, of Dearest's presence. That was old Sergeant Williamson, the Colonel's Negro servant, a retired first sergeant from the regiment he had last commanded. With increasing frequency, he would notice the old Negro pause in his work, as though trying to identify something too subtle for his senses, and then shake his head in bewilderment.

One afternoon in early October—just about a year ago—he had been reclining in a chair on the west veranda, smoking a cigar and trying to re-create, for his companion, a mental picture of an Indian camp as he had seen it in Wyoming in the middle '90's, when Sergeant Williamson came out from the house, carrying a pair of the Colonel's field-boots and a polishing-kit. Unaware of the Colonel's presence, he set down his burden, squatted on the floor and began polishing the boots, humming softly to himself. Then he must have caught a whiff of the Colonel's cigar. Raising his head, he saw the Colonel, and made as though to pick up the boots and polishing equipment.

"Oh, that's all right, Sergeant," the Colonel told him. "Carry on with what

you're doing. There's room enough for both of us here."

"Yessuh; thank yo', suh." The old ex-sergeant resumed his soft humming, keeping time with the brush in his hand.

"You know, Popsy, I think he knows I'm here," Dearest said. "Nothing definite, of course; he just feels there's something here that he can't see."

"I wonder. I've noticed something like that. Funny, he doesn't seem to mind, either. Colored people are usually scary about ghosts and spirits and the like.... I'm going to ask him." He raised his voice. "Sergeant, do you seem to notice anything peculiar around here, lately?"

The repetitious little two-tone melody broke off short. The soldier-servant lifted his face and looked into the Colonel's. His brow wrinkled, as though he were trying to express a thought for which he had no words.

"Yo' notice dat, too, suh?" he asked. "Why, yessuh, Cunnel; Ah don' know 'zackly how t' say hit, but dey is som'n, at dat. Hit seems like ... like a kinda ... a kinda ." He chuckled. "Dat's hit, Cunnel; dey's a blessedness. Wondeh iffen Ah's gittin' r'ligion, now?"

"Well, all this is very interesting, I'm sure, Doctor," T. Barnwell Powell was saying, polishing his glasses on a piece of tissue and keeping one elbow on his briefcase at the same time. "But really, it's not getting us anywhere, so to say. You know, we must have that commitment signed by you. Now, is it or is it not your opinion that this man is of unsound mind?"

"Now, have patience, Mr. Powell," the psychiatrist soothed him. "You must admit that as long as this gentleman refuses to talk, I cannot be said to have interviewed him."

"What if he won't talk?" Stephen Hampton burst out. "We've told you about his behavior; how he sits for hours mumbling to this imaginary person he thinks is with him, and how he always steps aside when he opens a door, to let somebody who isn't there go through ahead of him, and how.... Oh, hell, what's the use? If he were in his right mind, he'd speak up and try to prove it, wouldn't he? What do you say, Myra?"

Myra was silent, and Colonel Hampton found himself watching her with interest. Her mouth had twisted into a wry grimace, and she was clutching the arms of her chair until her knuckles whitened. She seemed to be in some intense pain. Colonel Hampton hoped she were; preferably with something slightly fatal.

Sergeant Williamson's suspicion that he might be getting religion became a reality, for a time, that winter, after The Miracle.

It had been a blustery day in mid-January, with a high wind driving swirls of snow across the fields, and Colonel Hampton, fretting indoors for several days, decided to go out and fill his lungs with fresh air. Bundled warmly, swinging his blackthorn cane, he had set out, accompanied by Dearest, to tramp cross-country

to the village, three miles from "Greyrock." They had enjoyed the walk through the white wind-swept desolation, the old man and his invisible companion, until the accident had happened.

A sheet of glassy ice had lain treacherously hidden under a skift of snow; when he stepped upon it, his feet shot from under him, the stick flew from his hand, and he went down. When he tried to rise, he found that he could not. Dearest had been almost frantic.

"Oh, Popsy, you must get up!" she cried. "You'll freeze if you don't. Come on, Popsy; try again!"

He tried, in vain. His old body would not obey his will.

"It's no use, Dearest; I can't. Maybe it's just as well," he said. "Freezing's an easy death, and you say people live on as spirits, after they die. Maybe we can always be together, now."

"I don't know. I don't want you to die yet, Popsy. I never was able to get through to a spirit, and I'm afraid.... Wait! Can you crawl a little? Enough to get over under those young pines?"

"I think so." His left leg was numb, and he believed that it was broken. "I can try."

He managed to roll onto his back, with his head toward the clump of pine seedlings. Using both hands and his right heel, he was able to propel himself slowly through the snow until he was out of the worst of the wind.

"That's good; now try to cover yourself," Dearest advised. "Put your hands in your coat pockets. And wait here; I'll try to get help."

Then she left him. For what seemed a long time, he lay motionless in the scant protection of the young pines, suffering miserably. He began to grow drowsy. As soon as he realized what was happening, he was frightened, and the fright pulled him awake again. Soon he felt himself drowsing again. By shifting his position, he caused a jab of pain from his broken leg, which brought him back to wakefulness. Then the deadly drowsiness returned.

This time, he was wakened by a sharp voice, mingled with a throbbing sound that seemed part of a dream of the cannonading in the Argonne.

"Dah! Look-a dah!" It was, he realized, Sergeant Williamson's voice. "Gittin' soft in de haid, is Ah, yo' ol' wuthless no-'count?"

He turned his face, to see the battered jeep from "Greyrock," driven by Arthur, the stableman and gardener, with Sergeant Williamson beside him. The older Negro jumped to the ground and ran toward him. At the same time, he felt Dearest with him again.

"We made it, Popsy! We made it!" she was exulting. "I was afraid I'd never make him understand, but I did. And you should have seen him bully that other

man into driving the jeep. Are you all right, Popsy?"

"Is yo' all right, Cunnel?" Sergeant Williamson was asking.

"My leg's broken, I think, but outside of that I'm all right," he answered both of them. "How did you happen to find me, Sergeant?"

The old Negro soldier rolled his eyes upward. "Cunnel, hit war a mi'acle of de blessed Lawd!" he replied, solemnly. "An angel of de Lawd done appeahed unto me." He shook his head slowly. "Ah's a sinful man, Cunnel; Ah couldn't see de angel face to face, but de glory of de angel was befoh me, an' guided me."

They used his cane and a broken-off bough to splint the leg; they wrapped him in a horse-blanket and hauled him back to "Greyrock" and put him to bed, with Dearest clinging solicitously to him. The fractured leg knit slowly, though the physician was amazed at the speed with which, considering his age, he made recovery, and with his unfailing cheerfulness. He did not know, of course, that he was being assisted by an invisible nurse. For all that, however, the leaves on the oaks around "Greyrock" were green again before Colonel Hampton could leave his bed and hobble about the house on a cane.

Arthur, the young Negro who had driven the jeep, had become one of the most solid pillars of the little A.M.E. church beyond the village, as a result. Sergeant Williamson had also become an attendant at church for a while, and then stopped. Without being able to define, or spell, or even pronounce the term, Sergeant Williamson was a strict pragmatist. Most Africans are, even five generations removed from the slave-ship that brought their forefathers from the Dark Continent. And Sergeant Williamson could not find the blessedness at the church. Instead, it seemed to center about the room where his employer and former regiment commander lay. That, to his mind, was quite reasonable. If an Angel of the Lord was going to tarry upon earth, the celestial being would naturally prefer the society of a retired U.S.A. colonel to that of a passel of triflin', no-'counts at an ol' clapboard church house. Be that as it may, he could always find the blessedness in Colonel Hampton's room, and sometimes, when the Colonel would be asleep, the blessedness would follow him out and linger with him for a while.

Colonel Hampton wondered, anxiously, where Dearest was, now. He had not felt her presence since his nephew had brought his lawyer and the psychiatrist into the house. He wondered if she had voluntarily separated herself from him for fear he might give her some sign of recognition that these harpies would fasten upon as an evidence of unsound mind. He could not believe that she had deserted him entirely, now when he needed her most....

"Well, what can I do?" Doctor Vehrner was complaining. "You bring me here to interview him, and he just sits there and does nothing.... Will you consent to my giving him an injection of sodium pentathol?"

"Well, I don't know, now," T. Barnwell Powell objected. "I've heard of that

drug—one of the so-called 'truth-serum' drugs. I doubt if testimony taken under its influence would be admissible in a court...."

"This is not a court, Mr. Powell," the doctor explained patiently. "And I am not taking testimony; I am making a diagnosis. Pentathol is a recognized diagnostic agent."

"Go ahead," Stephen Hampton said. "Anything to get this over with.... You agree, Myra?"

Myra said nothing. She simply sat, with staring eyes, and clutched the arms of her chair as though to keep from slipping into some dreadful abyss. Once a low moan escaped from her lips.

"My wife is naturally overwrought by this painful business," Stephen said. "I trust that you gentlemen will excuse her.... Hadn't you better go and lie down somewhere, Myra?"

She shook her head violently, moaning again. Both the doctor and the attorney were looking at her curiously.

"Well, I object to being drugged," Colonel Hampton said, rising. "And what's more, I won't submit to it."

"Albert!" Doctor Vehrner said sharply, nodding toward the Colonel. The pithecanthropoid attendant in the white jacket hastened forward, pinned his arms behind him and dragged him down into the chair. For an instant, the old man tried to resist, then, realizing the futility and undignity of struggling, subsided. The psychiatrist had taken a leather case from his pocket and was selecting a hypodermic needle.

Then Myra Hampton leaped to her feet, her face working hideously.

"No! Stop! Stop!" she cried.

Everybody looked at her in surprise, Colonel Hampton no less than the others. Stephen Hampton called out her name sharply.

"No! You shan't do this to me! You shan't! You're torturing me! you are all devils!" she screamed. "Devils! "

"Myra!" her husband barked, stepping forward.

With a twist, she eluded him, dashing around the desk and pulling open a drawer.

For an instant, she fumbled inside it, and when she brought her hand up, she had Colonel Hampton's .45 automatic in it. She drew back the slide and released it, loading the chamber.

Doctor Vehrner, the hypodermic in his hand, turned. Stephen Hampton sprang at her, dropping his drink. And Albert, the prognathous attendant, released Colonel Hampton and leaped at the woman with the pistol, with the unthinking promptness of a dog whose master is in danger.

Stephen Hampton was the closest to her; she shot him first, point-blank in the chest. The heavy bullet knocked him backward against a small table; he and it fell over together. While he was falling, the woman turned, dipped the muzzle of her pistol slightly and fired again; Doctor Vehrner's leg gave way under him and he went down, the hypodermic flying from his hand and landing at Colonel Hampton's feet. At the same time, the attendant, Albert, was almost upon her. Quickly, she reversed the heavy Colt, pressed the muzzle against her heart, and fired a third shot.

T. Barnwell Powell had let the briefcase slip to the floor; he was staring, slack-jawed, at the tableau of violence which had been enacted before him. The attendant, having reached Myra, was looking down at her stupidly. Then he stooped, and straightened.

"She's dead!" he said, unbelievingly.

Colonel Hampton rose, putting his heel on the hypodermic and crushing it.

"Of course she's dead!" he barked. "You have any first-aid training? Then look after these other people. Doctor Vehrner first; the other man's unconscious; he'll wait."

"No; look after the other man first," Doctor Vehrner said.

Albert gaped back and forth between them.

"Goddammit, you heard me!" Colonel Hampton roared. It was Slaughter-house Hampton, whose service-ribbons started with the Indian campaigns, speaking; an officer who never for an instant imagined that his orders would not be obeyed. "Get a tourniquet on that man's leg, you!" He moderated his voice and manner about half a degree and spoke to Vehrner. "You are not the doctor, you're the patient, now. You'll do as you're told. Don't you know that a man shot in the leg with a .45 can bleed to death without half trying?"

"Yo'-all do like de Cunnel says, 'r foh Gawd, yo'-all gwine wish yo' had," Sergeant Williamson said, entering the room. "Git a move on."

He stood just inside the doorway, holding a silver-banded malacca walking-stick that he had taken from the hall-stand. He was grasping it in his left hand, below the band, with the crook out, holding it at his side as though it were a sword in a scabbard, which was exactly what that walking-stick was. Albert looked at him, and then back at Colonel Hampton. Then, whipping off his necktie, he went down on his knees beside Doctor Vehrner, skillfully applying the improvised tourniquet, twisting it tight with an eighteen-inch ruler the Colonel took from the desk and handed to him.

"Go get the first-aid kit, Sergeant," the Colonel said. "And hurry. Mr. Stephen's been shot, too."

"Yessuh!" Sergeant Williamson executed an automatic salute and about-face and raced from the room. The Colonel picked up the telephone on the desk.

The County Hospital was three miles from "Greyrock"; the State Police substation a good five. He dialed the State Police number first.

"Sergeant Mallard? Colonel Hampton, at 'Greyrock.' We've had a little trouble here. My nephew's wife just went with one of my pistols, shot and wounded her husband and another man, and then shot and killed herself.... Yes, indeed it is, Sergeant. I wish you'd send somebody over here, as soon as possible, to take charge.... Oh, you will? That's good.... No, it's all over, and nobody to arrest; just the formalities.... Well, thank you, Sergeant."

The old Negro cavalryman re-entered the room, without the sword-cane and carrying a heavy leather box on a strap over his shoulder. He set this on the floor and opened it, then knelt beside Stephen Hampton. The Colonel was calling the hospital.

"... gunshot wounds," he was saying. "One man in the chest and the other in the leg, both with a .45 pistol. And you'd better send a doctor who's qualified to write a death certificate; there was a woman killed, too.... Yes, certainly; the State Police have been notified."

"Dis ain' so bad, Cunnel," Sergeant Williamson raised his head to say. "Ah's seen men shot wuss'n dis dat was ma'ked 'Duty' inside a month, suh."

Colonel Hampton nodded. "Well, get him fixed up as best you can, till the ambulance gets here. And there's whiskey and glasses on that table, over there. Better give Doctor Vehrner a drink." He looked at T. Barnwell Powell, still frozen to his chair, aghast at the carnage around him. "And give Mr. Powell a drink, too. He needs one."

He did, indeed. Colonel Hampton could have used a drink, too; the library looked like beef-day at an Indian agency. But he was still Slaughterhouse Hampton, and consequently could not afford to exhibit queasiness.

It was then, for the first time since the business had started that he felt the presence of Dearest.

"Oh, Popsy, are you all right?" the voice inside his head was asking. "It's all over, now; you won't have anything to worry about, any more. But, oh, I was afraid I wouldn't be able to do it!"

"My God, Dearest!" He almost spoke aloud. "Did you make her do that?"

"Popsy!" The voice in his mind was grief-stricken. "You.... You're afraid of me! Never be afraid of Dearest, Popsy! And don't hate me for this. It was the only thing I could do. If he'd given you that injection, he could have made you tell him all about us, and then he'd have been sure you were crazy, and they'd have taken you away. And they treat people dreadfully at that place of his. You'd have been driven really crazy before long, and then your mind would have been closed to me, so that I wouldn't have been able to get through to you, any more. What I did was the only thing I could do."

"I don't hate you, Dearest," he replied, mentally. "And I don't blame you. It was a little disconcerting, though, to discover the extent of your capabilities.... How did you manage it?"

"You remember how I made the Sergeant see an angel, the time you were down in the snow?" Colonel Hampton nodded. "Well, I made her see ... things that weren't angels," Dearest continued. "After I'd driven her almost to distraction, I was able to get into her mind and take control of her." Colonel Hampton felt a shudder inside of him. "That was horrible; that woman had a mind like a sewer; I still feel dirty from it! But I made her get the pistol—I knew where you kept it—and I knew how to use it, even if she didn't. Remember when we were shooting muskrats, that time, along the river?"

"Uhuh. I wondered how she knew enough to unlock the action and load the chamber." He turned and faced the others.

Doctor Vehrner was sitting on the floor, with his back to the chair Colonel Hampton had occupied, his injured leg stretched out in front of him. Albert was hovering over him with mother-hen solicitude. T. Barnwell Powell was finishing his whiskey and recovering a fraction of his normal poise.

"Well, I suppose you gentlemen see, now, who was really crazy around here?" Colonel Hampton addressed them bitingly. "That woman has been dangerously close to the borderline of sanity for as long as she's been here. I think my precious nephew trumped up this ridiculous insanity complaint against me as much to discredit any testimony I might ever give about his wife's mental condition as because he wanted to get control of my estate. I also suppose that the tension she was under here, this afternoon, was too much for her, and the scheme boomeranged on its originators. Curious case of poetic justice, but I'm sorry you had to be included in it, Doctor."

"Attaboy, Popsy!" Dearest enthused. "Now you have them on the run; don't give them a chance to re-form. You know what Patton always said—Grab 'em by the nose and kick 'em in the pants."

Colonel Hampton re-lighted his cigar. "Patton only said 'pants' when he was talking for publication," he told her, . Then he noticed the unsigned commitment paper lying on the desk. He picked it up, crumpled it, and threw it into the fire.

"I don't think you'll be needing that," he said. "You know, this isn't the first time my loving nephew has expressed doubts as to my sanity." He sat down in the chair at the desk, motioning to his servant to bring him a drink. "And see to the other gentlemen's glasses, Sergeant," he directed. "Back in 1929, Stephen thought I was crazy as a bedbug to sell all my securities and take a paper loss, around the first of September. After October 24th, I bought them back at about twenty per cent of what I'd sold them for, after he'd lost his shirt." That, he knew, would have an effect on T. Barnwell Powell. "And in December, 1944, I was just plain nuts,

selling all my munition shares and investing in a company that manufactured baby-food. Stephen thought that Rundstedt's Ardennes counter-offensive would put off the end of the war for another year and a half!"

"Baby-food, eh?" Doctor Vehrner chuckled.

Colonel Hampton sipped his whiskey slowly, then puffed on his cigar. "No, this pair were competent liars," he replied. "A good workmanlike liar never makes up a story out of the whole cloth; he always takes a fabric of truth and embroiders it to suit the situation." He smiled grimly; that was an accurate description of his own tactical procedure at the moment. "I hadn't intended this to come out, Doctor, but it happens that I am a convinced believer in spiritualism. I suppose you'll think that's a delusional belief, too?"

"Well...." Doctor Vehrner pursed his lips. "I reject the idea of survival after death, myself, but I think that people who believe in such a theory are merely misevaluating evidence. It is definitely not, in itself, a symptom of a psychotic condition."

"Thank you, Doctor." The Colonel gestured with his cigar. "Now, I'll admit their statements about my appearing to be in conversation with some invisible or imaginary being. That's all quite true. I'm convinced that I'm in direct-voice communication with the spirit of a young girl who was killed by Indians in this section about a hundred and seventy-five years ago. At first, she communicated by automatic writing; later we established direct-voice communication. Well, naturally, a man in my position would dislike the label of spirit-medium; there are too many invidious associations connected with the term. But there it is. I trust both of you gentlemen will remember the ethics of your respective professions and keep this confidential."

"Oh, brother!" Dearest was fairly hugging him with delight. "When bigger and better lies are told, we tell them, don't we, Popsy?"

"Yes, and try and prove otherwise," Colonel Hampton replied, around his cigar. Then he blew a jet of smoke and spoke to the men in front of him.

"I intend paying for my nephew's hospitalization, and for his wife's funeral," he said. "And then, I'm going to pack up all his personal belongings, and all of hers; when he's discharged from the hospital, I'll ship them wherever he wants them. But he won't be allowed to come back here. After this business, I'm through with him."

T. Barnwell Powell nodded primly. "I don't blame you, in the least, Colonel," he said. "I think you have been abominably treated, and your attitude is most generous." He was about to say something else, when the doorbell tinkled and Sergeant Williamson went out into the hall. "Oh, dear; I suppose that's the police, now," the lawyer said. He grimaced like a small boy in a dentist's chair.

Colonel Hampton felt Dearest leave him for a moment. Then she was back.

"The ambulance." Then he caught a sparkle of mischief in her mood. "Let's have some fun, Popsy! The doctor is a young man, with brown hair and a mustache, horn-rimmed glasses, a blue tie and a tan-leather bag. One of the ambulance men has red hair, and the other has a mercurochrome-stain on his left sleeve. Tell them your spirit-guide told you."

The old soldier's tobacco-yellowed mustache twitched with amusement.

"No, gentlemen, it is the ambulance," he corrected. "My spirit-control says...." He relayed Dearest's descriptions to them.

T. Barnwell Powell blinked. A speculative look came into the psychiatrist's eyes; he was probably wishing the commitment paper hadn't been destroyed.

Then the doctor came bustling in, brown-mustached, blue-tied, spectacled, carrying a tan bag, and behind him followed the two ambulance men, one with a thatch of flaming red hair and the other with a stain of mercurochrome on his jacket-sleeve.

For an instant, the lawyer and the psychiatrist gaped at them. Then T. Barnwell Powell put one hand to his mouth and made a small gibbering sound, and Doctor Vehrner gave a faint squawk, and then both men grabbed, simultaneously, for the whiskey bottle.

The laughter of Dearest tinkled inaudibly through the rumbling mirth of Colonel Hampton.